



Story Circle Journal

Vol. 13 No. 1, March, 2009

The newsletter for women with stories to tell...

LifeLines: A Story Circle Life Writing Retreat

The Compassionate Memoir
A Weekend Writing Retreat With Lisa Dale Norton
May 15-17, 2009 • Festival Hill, Round Top TX

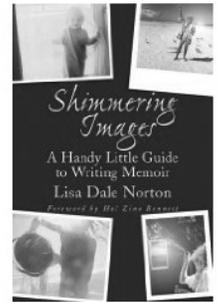


What if we really talked with each other, & listened to each other, & held each others' stories as sacred information that could transform our lives? What if we learned to shape the stories of our lives as containers for our experience & an expression of our heart's greatest desires? What if we wrote what we had learned & took it home with us as a guide to realizing our dreams & hopes? Writing our past in the present can be a life line to a future filled with hope.

In this workshop we'll consider the contemporary memoir—what makes it work and what doesn't. We'll discuss autobiography, memoir, honesty, the right to speak, authentic voice, and the difference between truth and fact. We'll practice the skills necessary to translate life experience onto the page: finding Shimmering Images (iconic memories), understanding how they govern story structure, choosing a beginning, seeing the ending implicit in that beginning, and creating a narrative arc that engages readers' curiosity. But we'll go beyond compositional basics to explore the attribute that can set a memoir apart in the marketplace: compassion, the key to winning readers' hearts. A compassionately conceived memoir has the power to change your life and the lives of others. Through group exercises and individual writing assignments, we'll practice using compassion to re-see life events, develop the complex persona of the narrator, and portray loved ones (and enemies) as multi-dimensional, fallible characters.

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Be sure to pick up and read Lisa's book, *Shimmering Images: A Handy Little Guide to Writing Memoir* before attending the retreat.



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Story Circle Network's inspiring and informative conferences and retreats bring members back year after year.

"I had never been to such an event, and found the whole thing quite amazing, far beyond anything I'd expected. I will certainly plan to return for the next one, and know that a great adventure is beginning with SCN."

"I will remember the beauty, sincerity, courage, and openness of the women present."

"I was impressed by the attention to detail. I think I've found a home in SCN."

Letter From SCN's President—Joyce Boatright



“To keep our faces toward change and behave like free spirits in the presence of fate is strength undefeatable.”

Helen Keller

One change I've noticed is that families are spending more time with one another, cooking meals at home and eating together, playing board games, being in relationship with each other, and making memories. We're talking *with each other* instead of *at the television set*. Hard times or not, these are times we'll remember in our hearts. As women, we need to gather

these memories-in-the-making and shape them into stories.

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. We carry out our mission through publications, a web site, classes, workshops, writing and reading circles, and woman-focused programs. Our activities empower women to tell their stories, discover their identities through their stories, and choose to be the authors of their own lives. We take our mission very seriously and continually seek ways to inspire, encourage and support our members in giving voice to their life stories.

The circles of the Story Circle Network remain the bedrock of our organization. Thanks to the tireless efforts of Lee Ambrose, we have over 200 members who meet in small virtual circles via their computers. For our members who are flung afar and find it difficult to travel, the computer opens the door to the Story Circle Network.

Face-to-face circles are thriving too. Austin has 80 women who meet in various small circles to discuss books or to write in a circle. And thanks to gentle shepherding by Lisa Shirah-Hiers and Sharon Blumberg, circles continue to grow all over the country, as do small groups of OWL writers, directed by Anne Beckner.

Lisa Dale Norton, author of *Hawk Flies Above* and *Shimmering Images*, will lead us May 15-17 in a women-only weekend of reflection and writing in picturesque Festival Hills. Located on 200 wooded acres outside Round Top, TX, the site includes historical houses, extensive gardens, natural preserves—a magical, peaceful retreat setting. This will be my third SCN-sponsored retreat at Festival Hills, and I can feel the stress of work leave me by visualizing the herb garden behind the house where we dine.

For those who can join us, the experience will be memorable. However, if you're feeling the pinch of your pocketbook, I want to encourage you to create your own retreat and use the prompts from “Women's Wise Words & a Week's Worth of Writing Prompts” for motivation to reflect and write. The prompts arrive every week in Internet Chapter members' email inboxes, but if you're like me, there have been occasional weeks with no time to sit and write. Take those saved prompts, brew a cup of herbal tea and, well, *retreat* into your memories.

Afterwards, let us bear witness to your stories through our network of writing circles and through this Journal.

Story Circle Network's Mission

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

Story Circle Journal

STORY CIRCLE JOURNAL is a quarterly newsletter, published in March, June, September, and December. It is written by and for women who want to share their experiences. Its purpose is to encourage readers to become writers, guide women to set down their true stories, and encourage the sharing of women's lives. This newsletter is provided for information and is not intended to replace qualified therapeutic assistance. If you have special mental-health needs, please see a healthcare professional.

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We welcome your letters, queries, and suggestions.

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\$45 Canada and Mexico
\$50 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: \$1.25 for 1 issue, \$5 for 2–5 issues, \$7.50 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.

SCN's Website Has a Totally New Look!

By Susan Wittig Albert

Have you ever owned an outfit for years and years, so long that that was totally out of style—but you loved it and wore it anyway?

Have you ever wanted to remodel your house so some of the rooms would be more useful? Or give your kitchen a new look, with spiffy new appliances and a complete paint-and-wallpaper-and-floor re-do?

Or maybe you've even gone a little farther and had a facelift for yourself (or wanted to, anyway.)

Well, that's how we've felt here at SCN—about our website. We've loved it, and used it constantly, and always found it useful. But we wanted to remodel it to make it easier to use. We wanted to install some new bells and whistles. And we wanted to make it more cheerful and attractive, so that visitors could get a strong sense of the community that SCN members feel.

And that's what Peggy Moody—our webmistress (and also our Executive Director) has done for us. We hope you'll like our new site as much as we do!

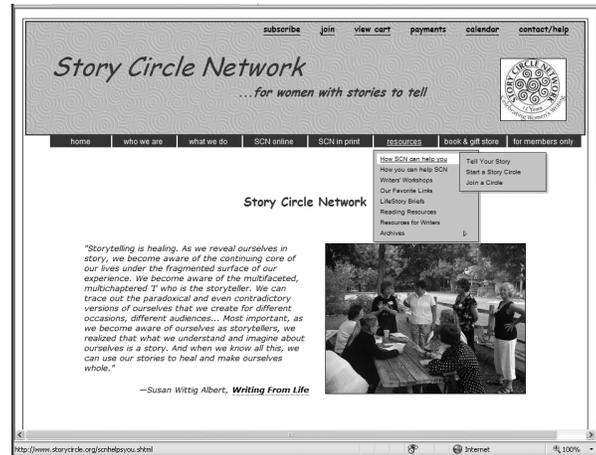
Before I invite you to drop in for a visit, I'd like to tell you something about SCN's online history. I'm the right person to tell this story, because I was there in 1997, when Peggy Moody became one of the first women to join our brand-new organization, and became our first secretary. It didn't take long for SCN's other board members to realize that Peggy had the perfect skill-set to help our fledgling organization create an online presence. Showing tremendous foresight, they asked her to become SCN's webmistress. I'm sure that everyone who has ever worked with Peggy will tell you that it was one of the best decisions our board has ever made.

Now, please remember that, back in 1997, we didn't use terms like "skill-set" or "online presence." But we did recognize that Peggy knew how to build a website and that she understood the needs of our young organization. So she got busy and created our first website and then began adding the pages we needed: announcements of our programs and projects, an invitation to membership, sections of the early *Journals*, calendars and schedules, book lists, writing resources, and much, much more.

Over the next ten years, Peggy's remarkable web work made it possible for us to...

- promote our conference programs and register attendees online;
- conduct a writing contest with thirty-forty entries and more than a dozen judges reading and scoring online;
- create and manage an Internet Chapter with multiple writing and reading circles;
- create and develop a book review website;
- create and develop an online class and mentoring program

These are just some of the things you can see when you visit our website. But there are other vitally important things that



you can't see. The part of the site that's restricted to board members, for instance, where the minutes of board meetings are kept, along with other important documents. Or the mechanics of record-keeping and payments for our teachers, our membership records. And then there's the private website Peggy built so that the four editors of *What Wildness is This*, SCN's acclaimed anthology, could work on the book online—innovative pages that

made it possible for them to select, compile, and edit an enormous volume of material without ever sitting down together in the same room.

Well. If you're getting the idea that we think SCN's website is pretty spectacular, you're absolutely right. But good as it's been, we've known it could be even better, and for the past five months, Peggy has been working to do just that. Make it better.

And now it's finished, and open to the public, this wonderful new website of ours, still located at its familiar address: www.storycircle.org. When you visit, I'm sure you'll be impressed by its clean, crisp look; its new organization; its easy-to-navigate pages; and the impressive range of its contents. You'll find information about all our programs and projects, as well as links to our various websites (book review, online classes, and—shortly—our new Editorial Service). You'll also be able to renew your membership and purchase books and gifts using your credit card—new for us and more convenient for you. And best of all, you'll be able to access the brand-new Members-Only section, using the password and username that Peggy has sent you.

Of course, a website is like your favorite room: no matter how perfect it seems to be, there's always more to do. It's always a work-in-progress, with little adjustments and big additions. As time goes on, we'll be adding new pages to the Members-Only section and to the public section as well, as we look for ways to offer help to any woman who wants to tell her story: *her* story, the most important story in the world.

Over the years, we've come to recognize the vital importance of our website. It introduces SCN to the world. It is a gathering place for our members, a place to keep them in touch with activities and programs and each other. It is a work site for the women who volunteer to keep the organization moving and growing. We're very grateful to Peggy for her wonderful work—for the original website she built for us over a decade ago, for the attention and care she gives to it every day, and for the brand-new, beautiful site she's just created.

So when you visit—you will, won't you? and soon, I hope—please take some time to explore and enjoy. And then take a minute to drop Peggy a note and thank her for all her wonderful work.



Susan J. Tweit's *Walking Nature Home*

Susan J. Tweit is the award-winning author of twelve books including *Walking Nature Home* (UT Press, March 2009) and writes a weekly column for *The Mountain Mail*. She records and produces material for broadcast on KHEN-FM. Her essay, "Riding the River Home" appeared in the SCN anthology, *What Wildness is This: Women Write about the Southwest*. She is published in *Audubon*, *National Parks*, *The Denver Post* and *High Country News* and is a frequent lecturer and workshop pre-

sender, writing coach and reviewer for university presses and the SCN Book Review Site. In addition to her own blog, she is a contributor to *Audubon Magazine's*, "The Perch", and to SCN's "Herstories." She is scheduled to teach a course on SCN's new online classes entitled "Write Wild!" to share ways that nature can deepen and enrich a writing practice and is currently at work on a new book, *Rooted*, a how-to manual for being at home in place, wherever you are. Lisa Shirah-Hiers interviewed her via email for the SCJ.

SCJ: When did you first fall in love with the natural world?

Tweit: I was "born to" a family interested in natural history, within a culture of science. My father is a research chemist and ornithologist and my mother a librarian with a special interest in natural history. My brother is a fisheries biologist and noted birdwatcher. My grandparents include a design engineer and an accountant with a passion for horticulture and philosophy. One great-grandparent was a botanist who studied deserts around the world; another was a gentleman orchardist. So I had no choice about being immersed in nature study almost from birth! Nature was more than our hobby; its community was kin.

SCJ: Who and/or what led you to choose ecology as a career?

Tweit: I had no intention of following the family tradition into science. I was going to be an artist like my great-grandmother, a California landscape painter. I lacked her talent with brush and palette however; my medium was photography, capturing the play of light and shadow on film and paper. I started college in fine arts photography, and about the time I realized that I was not going to be the next Ansel Adams or Eliot Porter, I met a photographer of science who had a lab full of the latest equipment. Pretty soon I was using my cameras to document rare plant species and their habitat, and from there it was a short step into studying plant communities.

I'm fascinated by the patterns that plants make on landscapes: Why does this forest grow here, and not there? Why is this mesa-top covered with junipers, and this one grass and cactus? Why is this a swamp, and this a prairie? Why does sagebrush grow here, and rabbitbrush there? More so, I am fascinated by what those patterns mean to us and the other species with whom we share this planet. I read the stories of landscapes as others read the stories in human artifacts.

SCJ: When did you first know you would be a writer?

Tweit: I didn't wake up one day and say, "I think I'll be a writer." It was more of a gradual shift in my way of relating to the world and understanding what I had to bring to this life. Over the

years I worked in field ecology, spending weeks at a time out in the wilds mostly around Yellowstone National Park mapping grizzly bear habitat and the patterns of historic wildfires, and learning about the relationships that make up sagebrush communities, I became dissatisfied with the practice of science. I went to graduate school, but never finished a degree program. I turned to writing because I am a storyteller by nature, and I wanted to interpret what I call "the stories behind the data," the knowledge about natural communities and the relationships between species that form them. I didn't want to tell those stories in the dry and detached language of the research reports I was writing; I wanted to bring them alive in the ears and minds—and hearts—of readers. So I set out to teach myself how to write the stories of science. I took an internship with a regional environmental newspaper and learned that I do not think quickly enough to be a newspaper journalist. Then I went back to graduate school and took some writing classes, and finally, I just set out to write. That was 25 years ago, and I'm still learning!

Eventually, the confluence of difficult personal circumstances that open the story in *Walking Nature Home* thrust me out of my familiar—if not always comfortable rut in science and also pushed me away from the landscapes I called home.

SCJ: You have said on your website that the reason we should write about nature is because we have "an intimate relationship" with it that can "restore our sanity, ability to live generously, our hope for the future - and the future itself." Can you elaborate on that?

Tweit: I write about nature because it is the community I grew up immersed in, and because I believe as E.O. Wilson has asserted that our species is encoded with an affinity for other living beings, whether the wriggling forms of puppies and human children, the dancing wings of butterflies and swallows, or the gossamer blossoms of flowers. Wilson calls that innate empathy for other species "biophilia," literally "love of life." The molecules that make up our cells are the same building blocks that make up the cells of every other kind of life on this shimmering planet, from microscopic bacteria to macroscopic redwood trees.

SCJ: How does nature restore our sanity and allow us to live generously?

Tweit: In the last two decades, research on people and nature has shown that exposure to something as basic as images of nature lowers our blood pressure, results in more happy and generous feelings, reduces our aggression, and improves focus and concentration. Those are real, measurable results. One study showed that patients in hospital rooms with views of a single tree recovered from surgery more quickly, and experienced less pain and fewer post-surgery complications than patients in rooms with a view of an adjacent building. Another study shows that timed, regular exposure to natural settings, say a park with some wild edges, works as well or better than prescription drugs in helping children with ADHD focus and learn. Nature is healing; nature is soothing. What's most interesting to me is that these positive affects do not depend on our recognizing the connection—they apparently happen at very basic, unconscious levels.

I know that nature heals empirically through the research I've read, but I also know it deep in the core of my being, because I've lived it: my relationship to nature is what has helped me survive and learn to manage a chronic illness that was expected to kill me more than two decades ago. (That's the story in *Walking Nature Home*.)

Learning to embrace my childhood connection to what Aldo Leopold calls "the community of the land," learning to live and love again awakened the love we all carry within us, my natural biophilia. That love of life is what allows us to live generously. We may bury it deeply, but it doesn't leave us. It lives on in the very essence of our species—it is the spark that makes us human, waiting to burst into flame.

SCJ: In The San Luis Valley: Sand Dunes and Sandhill Cranes you write, "Love is what connects us to the rest of the living world, the divine urging from within that guides our best steps in the dance of life." What is this dance?

Tweit: We are born to what I would call the dance of life: it is our part in the larger cycle of birth to death, and then eventual

decomposition, freeing the atoms and molecules that we once called "us" to take part in some other life, continuing on the cycle. That dance involves everything we do in our lives: how we relate to each other; what we eat and buy and dispose of; how we treat other beings; what we believe, how we behave, and what we leave behind, in terms of our accomplishments, the physical detritus of lives, and the memories that last long after we are gone. If we live mindfully and thoughtfully, aware of ourselves and our interactions with our fellow passengers on the planet that Buckminster Fuller called "Spaceship Earth," we are fully joined in the dance of life.

SCJ: What is the hardest lesson life has ever taught you? How did the lesson manifest itself?

Tweit: The hardest lesson life taught me was that death is part of life, whether we are ready for it or not, no matter our age, and that now, this very moment is all we have for sure. We have no idea what will come next. That lesson came as a slap upside the head when I was still a young woman. I wrote *Walking Nature Home* to make sense of the story of my [life-threatening] illness, and what it taught me about love and life. Writing the story—sorting out what was important from what was not, sifting through the memories and emotions and events of my life, taught me to understand and articulate who I am and what I believe. I didn't expect it to take so long (more than two decades). Nor did I realize that what I was writing was basically a love story on several levels: it chronicles the two-decades-plus and still deepening bond with my husband and step-daughter, my lifelong love of nature, a love I nearly mis-placed in the pursuit of science, and my biggest lesson, that to live, I had to learn to love life itself.

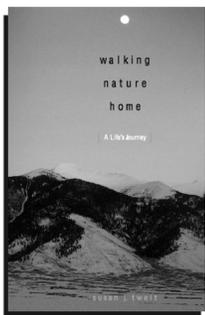
SCJ: What do you hope your legacy will be as a mother, writer, scientist, teacher, human being?

Tweit: I aim to leave this miraculous Earth—the only home our species has ever known—a more loving, joyous, and healthy place.

A Book Signing Event You Won't Want to Miss!

November 2, 2009 • 7-9pm • Be Our Guest

Garrison Chapel at the First United Methodist Church, 1201 Lavaca Street, Austin, Texas



Teacher, gardener, and bestselling author **Susan Wittig Albert** returns with her first nonfiction narrative, *Together, Alone: A Memoir of Marriage and Place*. This beautifully written memoir describes Susan's experiences of place, marriage, and separateness.

TOGETHER WITH

Ecologist, bestselling author, teacher, and passionate gardener **Susan J. Tweit**. Susan's latest book, *Walking Nature Home: A Life's Journey* is her memoir of what nature, Quakerism, and chronic illness taught her about love and life.





Online Learning *Helping Women Write Their Lives: One Story at a Time*

SCN's online program is in its seventh year and is reaching more students than ever before, through an expanding list of class offerings, as well as a newly created mentorship program.

If you've never taken a class online, you might be wondering just how it works. Do teachers and students "meet" together on the Internet, at a specified time? Is there some sort of "chat" involved? What kind of "lessons" are there? Where do you go to get them? What kind of assignment? How are they turned in? And what about deadlines? What happens if you have to miss a class, or have a family emergency and have to be away for a while? Lots of questions, good ones! Let's take them one at a time.

Do students and teachers meet on the Internet? Are there 'chats'?

It depends on the way the class is structured. Several of our classes are based on individual communication between one student and the teacher, via email. Some of our classes include shared communications among students in a Yahoo email group, as well as individual student/teacher communications. Sometimes, a teacher includes regular telephone conferences, either with the students as a group (everybody participates in a conference call, at a chosen and convenient time), or with individual students. So you can see that the definition of "meeting" varies from class to class. Whatever it is, and however the class is organized, the teacher spells it out clearly in her class description, so you will know what to expect.

What kind of lessons are there? How does the teacher offer them?

Again, that varies from teacher to teacher. Every teacher provides lesson material, usually with extensive background resources (bibliography, extra readings, online supportive documentation). She may post this on a private section of her personal or professional website, or post it to the files section of the Yahoo group site for her class, or send out her lessons as attachments to an email. With the lesson, she posts or sends the assignment, which each student is responsible for doing on her own.

What kinds of assignments should I expect? How often? What happens after I turn it in?

Since most of our classes are planned to last eight weeks, you can expect six or seven assignments. Depending on the class, these might be journal entries, online blog entries, poetry, informal essays, or more formally-structured pieces of writing. Each student follows the teacher's instructions,

prepares her essay, and returns it to the teacher, usually in a Word document attached to an email. Sometimes teachers suggest that students also share their assignments by posting them in the Yahoo group file. When the teacher receives the assignment, she offers suggestions, support, and/or critical feedback (the level/type of her assistance is defined in her class description) and returns it to the student, via the Internet, fax, or snail mail.

What if I have to take a break from the class for some sort of family emergency?

Students who need to interrupt their class should let the instructor know. Depending on the emergency situation, a student might get an extension or a refund for uncompleted classes. You're encouraged, though, to take the class at a time when you don't expect major interruptions for business travel, vacation, or other foreseeable reasons.

When will the next class sessions begin?

The next classes will begin April 13 and continue through June 8. We'll be posting the list of new classes in early March, on our website: www.storycircleonlineclasses.org. Even if you can't take a class now, drop in for a visit and see what we're offering.

Join Our Faculty

Are you a skilled writer with experience in teaching memoir, journaling, life-based fiction, or other lifewriting forms? Interested in joining our faculty?

Go to

www.storycircleonlineclasses.org/onlineproposal.php

Now accepting proposals for Summer 2009 sessions.
Deadline for proposals is May 6, 2009

What Our Teachers Say about Their Classes

SCN's teachers are unanimous. Teaching online is an exciting experience, full of new and interesting challenges. They are eager learners themselves, and are always willing to share what they've learned with their students. Three of our SCN teachers tell us about their experiences.



Erin Philbin, currently teaching "Finding Joy in the Details: Using the 'Small' Stories to Tell the Large Stories of Your Life." Erin says:

"The power of the on-line writing class is awesome. We come from different parts of the world, different backgrounds, and share different life experiences. Yet after a few short weeks, we are all connected by the power of the story. These thoughtful, brave women tell the stories only they can tell. It fills me with joy to know that these stories are saved, shared, heard."



Katherine Misegades, currently teaching "Beginning Blogging." Katherine reports:

"Two things I find delightful about the online class experience are the flexibility and the sense of community. Although the course has structure for the guided learning experience, there is a lot of room for class members to explore and bend the structure to meet their own needs. Also, several class members have faced challenging events since the course began, and other members have lent compassionate support."



Paula Yost, currently teaching "Memory to Memoir." Paula has this to say:

"What amazes me about teaching online classes is the ease with which my students and I can communicate across cyberspace; I've worked with writers in Switzerland, France, Canada, Australia, Spain, and throughout the U.S. It's a unique opportunity for us all to learn not only certain writing skills, but also to share widely differing viewpoints and voices. I consider it a privilege to work with all writers, from aspiring to accomplished, and have been particularly lucky to get a little closer to many of my SCN sisters while encouraging and acquainting them with the delights of writing memoir."

What Students Say about Their Teachers

"Fantastic—I couldn't wait to get her comments—she was so on target—it was such a help—I want to put her in my back pocket like a little iPod and listen to her suggestions whenever I write."



"Please offer more courses and more courses like this! Or possibly even a Stage 2 of the one just offered. I am more likely to join a course associated with SCN than some of the others such as Writers' Digest, since I trust SCN to find good teachers, to offer a more personal touch and to preserve privacy. Thank you!"



"I so much appreciated the comments. They were constructive and encouraging. They helped with the "nuts and bolts" and also with the larger issues of character development, story development..."

"[This instructor] was the best I've ever had, and I've taken a lot of writing classes. Thorough, professional, demanding—but inspiring, too. What more could I ask? I can't wait to take her next class!"



"This course gave me the confidence that I can write and motivated me to want to do it, even when I don't feel like it. More, more!"



"[This instructor] is tough and makes you work hard, but she's still warm and approachable—pretty remarkable for somebody who's published so many books. This was the best class ever! Didn't think I could learn so much and feel so good about what I wrote."



Take a Bow! Spotlighting Our Volunteers

Joyce Boatright

SCN President Joyce Boatright took office in January. We want to introduce you to this dynamic, competent lady. *By Lisa Shirah-Hiers*

“Telling our life story is, in my opinion, the most precious gift we can give one another. By writing our memoirs, we make sense of our lives. By sharing our life story and listening to others share theirs, we open our hearts and we connect to each other in an earthy, yet very spiritual manner.”

~Joyce Boatright, *Telling Your Story: A Basic Guide to Memoir Writing*

Joyce Boatright is a confirmed and proud Texan. She was born in a military hospital in upstate New York at the end of World War II, but the family moved back to Texas the moment her dad mustered out of the service, and she’s been living in “this great state” ever since.

Joyce grew up in Huntsville, on the edge of the East Texas Piney Woods, and earned an undergraduate degree in journalism at Sam Houston State University. After graduation, she worked for her hometown weekly paper as a proofreader, then secured a teaching position in journalism in a Houston high school. She went on to Texas A&M where she earned a masters in Public Relations and a doctorate in Education, with an emphasis on higher education marketing. She says: “I’ve traveled all over the United States, Mexico, Canada, Italy, Ireland, Scotland, England, France, but I always come home to Texas.”

Joyce says that almost all her jobs have been interesting. “I love teaching—it is a challenge to keep students engaged, and such a kick in the pants to see the lights of understanding go on!” When she started freelancing as a journalist, she told herself she wouldn’t turn down a job. “As a result, I’ve had some incredible assignments.... I’ve interviewed a city mayor, a San Antonio Spurs basketball star, and a sex therapist, to name a few.” She wrote a story on global warming a couple of years before the famous Al Gore documentary. “I cannot tell you the hours I spent researching the topic,” she says, “trying to figure out what all the scientists were saying. Not only did I have to understand it, but I had to be able to boil it down to 400 words. If that wasn’t daunting enough, my audience for the magazine piece was a bunch of seventh and eighth graders!”

Joyce has also worked as a marketing consultant for businesses, writing annual reports, executive profiles and sales copy; helped a business colleague write an educational marketing plan for a private Mexican university; and wrote and produced a public affairs radio program for the Houston Community College System.

The common thread running through all these rich experiences is teaching. “My dad was a professor of education at Sam Houston State University, and my mother was superintendent of the Texas Prison School System. What can I say? Teaching is in my genes.”

Joyce says it was a short leap from journalism to life writing. “I became a journalist because I’m curious about people—

some might say nosy. I’ve always specialized in feature writing and people profiles. I guess it’s a natural evolution that I would come around to writing life stories, first about the others in my family, and then more closely looking at my own choices and consequences.”

Now Joyce is bringing together all her experience as a writer, teacher, broadcaster, and marketing specialist to write a grant from her college foundation to fund “In Her Own Voice,” a podcast showcasing women from her SCN OWL circle. She’s seeking additional funding to produce an anthology of the stories circle members have written about their fathers.

In her life-writing instruction book, *Telling Your Story: A Basic Guide to Memoir Writing*, Joyce describes the importance of the defining points in a life. For her, these defining points have been “simple things,” such as getting a driver’s license at 15; watching son, Matthew and daughter-in-law, Sharon hold their three-month-old foster child and remembering when she held Matthew at the same age; and dealing with the loss of a failed marriage. The turning point in her struggle for self-acceptance came after her divorce during a trip to Hawaii with a cousin. “We laughed until our sides hurt after I burst into tears trying to look in the mirror and say ‘I love and accept myself just as I am.’ That’s a struggle every woman can identify with.

Joyce is a go-get-’em, gutsy kind of gal. Perhaps that’s why another defining point was her purchase, at age 59, of a Harley Davidson Roadster Motorcycle. “I did it because it was an outrageous thing to do. Several guy friends had bought bikes and one of the wives said she’d take motorcycle lessons with me if I was serious. I wasn’t serious, but I felt the need to do something radical to get out of my rut. I loved riding that bike. I could feel every fraction of a degree change in the temperature. I could smell every scent in the wind. I could ride with the big boys, and I could ride for miles along state highways and county roads from the Hill Country to the Gulf coast, stopping at roadside cafes for coffee and cherry pie. A couple of years ago I sold my bike to pay my escalating property taxes. It was time for me to get a car with a seatbelt, but what a ride that little Harley Sportster was. It really changed my perspective, made me feel more alive that I’d felt in years. Now I want to *stay* alive!” she adds with a chuckle.

Riding with the big boys may have been an important motivation. Joyce says she grew up a “middle child, sandwiched between two brothers in a family that valued males and the male model for success. I used to joke that my epitaph would say: ‘But what have you done lately?’ Both my parents were very focused on accomplishments (note the “s”). As a result, I grew up from a slacker (why try—girls don’t matter) to a perfectionist and workaholic. It wasn’t until my divorce that I began to realize the price of being a human doer instead of a human being. I can still get caught up in the siren song of fame and ego, but my soul requires that I find the joy of being a woman among women rather than a diva.”

Joyce says that her sixties, like her thirties, seem to be a fertile time, but with a difference. “It isn’t so much about accolades now as it is about being present. I’m not in a hurry anymore. I can find the richness in the details of the day. It has taken a period of grief for me to let go of my youth, but now I am seeing the gifts of a life lived fully. And I see that there is more road ahead....”

Joyce says she took the position of President because she loves the SCN. “Susan Wittig Albert has founded an extraordinary organization with a mission that speaks to my heart, and I want to do everything I can to advance that mission.” Her goals as president are as straightforward as she is herself. Among other things, she wants the Board to focus on a review of the bylaws

and update the Policies and Procedures Manual. “With the organization growing from its base in Austin, it is crucial that procedures be written down for continuity.”

She sees the greatest challenge facing SCN as managing its growth. “With the economic downturn, it may be more difficult for women to find the financial resources to come to writing workshops, retreats and conferences. We need to keep our current members and attract new members. In order to do that, we’ve got to expand our member services.

I think we are doing that. We just need to keep doing it in an organized way so we don’t get spread too thickly in one place and too thinly in many places. It’s important to the future of the organization to encourage active participation of our members. There are no cliques in SCN: we’re inclusive and collaborative. And there are plenty of interesting projects that need more volunteers.”

Reading Joyce’s impressive resume, one can’t help thinking that she is tailor-made to take SCN into the next decade. It’s a challenge she’s ready and able to meet. “When I was younger, I kept wondering when I would ‘arrive,’ you know, get to the mountaintop. But today I understand that no one ever ‘arrives.’ Life is the journey, an endless journey. So I sit back now and enjoy the ride. That’s what riding that Harley taught me.”

Under Joyce’s leadership, SCN will take its own journey, with a very competent driver at the wheel. I can hardly wait to see where we end up.

From the editor of *True Words*...

Getting Your Work Published In the Journal

by Mary Jo Doig

When Marie Buckley resigned as the Journal’s *True Words* editor in September 2004, I applied for the position, was graced with being selected, and began editing *True Words* in the December 2004 Journal. Jane Ross was the Journal’s editor then, and as part of my interview process, sent me a sample story to edit. In that moment, poring over the story, I discovered how much I enjoyed spending time with another woman’s words. I hadn’t read many memoirs yet and found myself not only drawn into the story in a very personal way, deeply experiencing the images and feelings the story evoked, but found as well a pleasure in giving it a little polish. I wanted that story to sparkle as brightly as it could, with minimal intrusion from me, for others to enjoy. And thus I opened to the understanding that editing was going to be a sister companion on my writing journey. It was indeed a transforming moment.

I felt my most important first task was to develop a solid criterion for selecting the stories for publication that began arriving in my mailbox. Primarily I wanted to achieve a good balance between several factors. Here is what I developed and still use today:

Quality of writing. While writing skills are certainly an important factor, on many more than one occasion I have spent considerable time polishing a member’s story. She may not have had perfect writing skills, but she did have a gem of a story to tell.

Essay vs story. Story Circle Network is a place where we share our life stories. Sometimes I receive a piece that is an essay rather than a story about the theme. While many essays have been thoughtful and well written, they are outside the definition of story and are not published in *True Words*. If I see the possibility of transformation from essay to story, I talk with the author about that.

Adherence to the topic. I try to choose prompts that are broad enough to inspire a multitude of varied stories, and nearly all stories and poems I receive are focused on the topic. Occasionally I receive one with just a slender thread of connection yet, as long as that thread is there, I will put it into the group for consideration. Other times, though, I can find no thread, and will talk with the author as soon after her submission as possible to discern if one exists and allow time for re-write.

Continued on page 22





Kitchen Table Stories

Passover Traditions: The Perennial Menu

Janet Caplan

A member of Story Circle Network since 2005, Janet Caplan lives along with her husband, one daughter and a couple of cocker spaniels outside of Victoria on Vancouver Island. Her work has appeared in the magazines *Canadian Stories* and *Dogs in Canada*, the anthologies *Holiday Writes* and Story Circle's own *Kitchen Table Stories*. She also writes profiles on local personalities for a regional newspaper.

I'm not really a traditional kind of person but I do enjoy certain traditions and in particular, those that involve holidays and a good meal. As we're on the south side of the winter solstice now, my thoughts are turning to spring and along with that one of my favorite holiday traditions: the Passover Seder.

As a child in Montreal, the two Seders were split between my parents' home and the home of my aunt and uncle. Oh yes, I do have fond memories of the "kids table" and all of the kicking and pinching that went on under it. After I married, one of the two meals was eaten with my husband's family. Bubby's chicken soup and matzo balls were legendary. When my husband and I moved to Toronto and both of my brothers and their families followed, we began our own traditions. And all of these years and two moves later, I still adhere to them.

The Seder planning begins with the numbers-how many will be attending. Just our immediate family this year or shall we invite friends? Once that's settled and that generally means a few friends are included, I consult my tried and true cookbooks. These are not just any cookbooks, mind you. These are my Jewish cookbooks. They originated, probably as fundraisers, with a Hadassah group, a B'nai Brith chapter and a synagogue sisterhood, and I know that I received them all as gifts from various members of my husband's family. Need I say more? Each has a terrific variety of recipes for all of the Jewish holidays including everything from kosher hors d'oeuvres to flourless desserts perfect for Passover. A few years ago I actually added a new book to the collection, one that is solely dedicated to Jewish baking. Not only do the recipes taste and read deliciously, they look that way too.

So with all of this at my finger tips, as well as all that is available online, why do I find myself preparing pretty much the same meal year after year? Tradition! Tradition! It's not that it's easy; it's not that it's a no brainer. It's just that good—I think. And apparently so do the Seder participants, as I find myself basking in the glow of their compliments each year. Most importantly, it's what I've cooked, roasted and baked year after year; it's expected and therefore it is my family's tradition.

As I sat down at the kitchen table to write this, I leaned over and picked out my Hadassah Cookbook from the shelf. I opened it to find 10 or so loose papers all having to do with Seder menus: chicken soup and matzo balls, brisket, roast turkey with fruit

stuffing, carrot kugel (pudding), rosti potatoes, apple cake and more. Based on some of these notations, I must have served potato knishes, green beans and cauliflower on occasion. Numerous desserts are always included as are the items on the Seder plate such as hard boiled eggs, horse radish, charosis (chopped apple and nuts combined with wine) and other symbolic items. I must admit that I have a great fondness for baking and note the emphasis that I've placed on that part of each menu. It's not always a simple matter to find delicious baked goods for this event. Using flour is, of course, verboten. Sponge cakes and other selections heavy on the egg content are often presented, but personally, I really am not a fan. The annual favorite at my table appears to be my flourless chocolate cake, which I have adopted and adapted over the years and which I happily serve with raspberry sauce and whipped cream. "Why wait for Passover?" one might ask? Enjoy.

Chocolate Cake

1/2 cup butter	Dash of salt
8 ounces. bittersweet chocolate	2/3 cup sugar
5 large eggs, separated	

Preheat oven to 325 degrees Fahrenheit . Grease a 10" round spring form pan.

Melt the chocolate and butter in a double boiler or microwave, stirring occasionally. In a large mixing bowl, beat the egg yolks, salt and all but 3 tbsps of the sugar. Stir into melted chocolate mixture.

Beat the egg whites until soft peaks form and then gradually beat in the 3 tbsps of sugar until the whites are stiff but not dry. Stir 1/4 of the whites into the chocolate mixture to lighten it and then fold in the remaining whites. Pour into the prepared pan and bake for 1 hour and 15 minutes. Note that as the cake cools, the center will sink and crack but don't worry, it gets camouflaged by the raspberry sauce and whipped cream!

Raspberry Sauce

2 10-ounce packages of frozen raspberries, thawed
1/4 cup sugar, to taste
1 teaspoon lemon juice

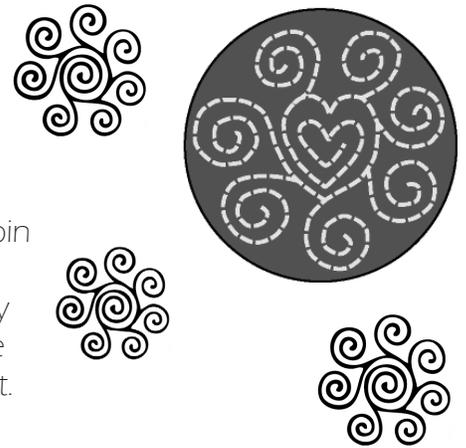
Puree all of these ingredients in blender or processor and chill until serving.

Circles: The Heart of Story Circle Network

Start One of Your Own!

Lisa Shirah-Hiers

The more circles we establish, and the more members of those circles join SCN, the wider we will fling our arms, embracing women all over the world, letting them know that they do have something important to say and helping them to say it, letting them know that their experiences are universal and compelling and interesting and even historically important.



On Wednesday, February 4 of this year, Mary Olivia Patino began a 10-week memoir class in San Antonio, with the hope that it will grow into a circle—and more.

The class meets Wednesdays, 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon at the SoL Center at University Presbyterian Church, 300 Bushnell Avenue. It will continue through April 22 (except for the Wednesdays of Holy Week and Spring Break). Facilitator Mary Olivia Patino has this to say about the series:

“Our memories encompass diverse pieces, people and events in our lives which, when reflected upon, reveal a rich and colorful heritage. During our weekly gatherings, which include prayer and refreshments, we will read, write, discuss and celebrate our personal stories.” The group will publish a collection of writing at the end of the series.

Lucy Burton, Director of the SoL Center, says that Mary Olivia uses some techniques developed by the project “Encuentros de Mujeres” and also draws from her experience as a facilitator of reflection circles as well as various retreats.

Lucy and Mary Olivia see this new circle as a first step in establishing a Story Circle Network Chapter in San Antonio which would offer *Be Our Guest*, *Writing from Life* and other SCN programs there.

At the present time SCN has only one chapter—the Internet Chapter, but the dream is that some day we may have local chapters all over the country, offering SCN events and member services. For this to happen, we need to grow the number of circles and the concentration of members in other geographical regions.

This reflects the Board of Directors’ goal of spreading SCN events and member opportunities beyond Austin. Just imagine a conference in Chicago or New York or San Francisco! Or how about Paris, London or Rome? The more circles we establish, and the more members of those circles join SCN, the wider we will fling our arms, embracing women all over the world, letting them know that they do have something important to say and helping them to say it, letting them know that their experiences are universal and compelling and interesting and even historically important.

That’s what SCN is all about, and it’s people like Mary Olivia and Lucy who make that happen.

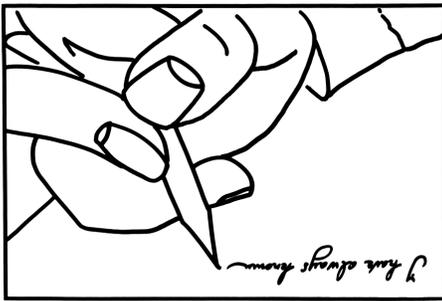
If you’d like to find out more about the SoL Center visit <http://solcenter.ning.com/>. You can learn more about Mary Olivia Patino and submit your own family stories for publication on her website at <http://writingpatino.com>.

If you have been thinking about starting a circle in your area but are worried about the commitment that might entail, consider a short series first. The SCN Guide for Facilitators features 6 sessions worth of prompts. If you met just once per month and used only the prompts in the Guide, you wouldn’t have to do much besides finding a location and advertising for members. Many circles start out this way—with a definite beginning, middle and end. Afterward the group may decide they are having so much fun they want to continue. At that point a new facilitator might be chosen, or the group could rotate leadership and organization duties. The Guide is free to SCN members and just \$3.00 for non-members and can be ordered via the Resources/How SCN Can Help You/Start A Story Circle section of the website. Story Circle Network member facilitators may also choose to join our Facilitator’s Yahoo group where they can post questions, give and receive advice on organizing and running a circle. And of course, all SCN affiliated circles (those whose facilitators are SCN members) are free to post their circle description and contact info on our Story Circles Around the World listing on the SCN website.

You can check the same listing if you are interested in seeing whether a story circle is already meeting in your community. Go to www.storycircle.org and find Story Circles Around the World in the Who We Are or What We Do drop down menus. Or, go straight to <http://www.storycircle.org/circles.shtml>

Facilitators and journalers alike can also make good use of SCN’s Starting Points: Weekly Writing Prompts for Women with Stories to Tell. This wonderful collection features the best prompts of SCN Founder, Susan Wittig Albert’s popular Women’s Wise Words weekly email series. It’s available directly from the publisher, Lulu, at <http://www.lulu.com/content/774054>. A hard copy is just \$8 plus shipping and handling, or download for just \$5.00!

If you have questions about circles, please contact the Circles Coordinator at storycircle@storycircle.org.



True Words from Real Women

Winds of Change

A selection of short pieces of lifewriting by our members, edited by **Mary Jo Doig**. The theme of this issue's True Words section is "Winds of Change." Contribute your own True Words to the Journal. Future topics are listed on page 24.



Cheerful Tolerance of the Indignities of Aging



Jean Hough
Carlsbad CA

Does a "coochie coochie coo" experience count as an indignity when it is directed at an elder? For me, this experience was not an indignity. In fact, because I was not only cheerfully tolerant but also utterly delighted by it, the following tale may need to be disqualified. But it's just too much fun not to share.

Mother was in her mid-eighties and I was in my early sixties. Together we were trundling the cumbersome cart up and down narrow supermarket aisles.

A fellow shopper approached us, beaming. "Are you two sisters?" Mother and I chuckled and explained our relationship.

Incredibly other shoppers in other stores raised this same question. Further, one trilled, "Are you twins?" Looking like she wanted to chuck us under our chins like wee infants, she cooed, "You're adorable."

For the 10 years I was preoccupied with helping my parents through the indignities and infirmities of aging, I paid little heed to the signs of my own winds of change. Eventually I was forced to take stock of the façade I presented to the world.

"Ma'am. Ma'am!" With no one else in the vicinity, I finally realized the young whippersnapper must be hailing me. When had I aged from "Miss" to "Ma'am"?

Clothes purchased years ago to accommodate plump protrusions in proper places now hang on a bent-twig figure. These protrusions have gone south, now sunken and slumbering on shelves below. Oh well.

Ptois. That's what physicians call droopy eyelids. The ophthalmologist must now gather my eyelid folds in order to measure glaucoma pressures. What fun an Old English sheepdog and I could have peering into each other's shrouded peepers.

Today's world is a whizzing whirligig. Speedspeak, gobble-dygook to my dwindling "dog ears," can be amusing. Mumbly-mouthed entertainers invite me to create my own script. Free-way drivers honk, shout, and gesticulate at my sedate 55 miles per hour.

Okay. I'm obsolete but cheerful. And yet, visions of my Peter Pan days embrace me, almost obliterating reality. "Tinkerbell, where are you? Please come back and sprinkle some fairy dust on me, staunching the winds of change."



First Kiss
Dawn Parrett Thurston
Villa Park CA

He wasn't that good looking, but he had a certain pigeon-toed John Wayne swagger that snagged me at the get-go. His wavy blond hair, cropped short, was light enough to earn him the nickname Whitey. He wore black horn-rimmed glasses that he removed for parties, dances, and kissing girls.

I know he didn't wear them the night he kissed me as we danced to Johnny Mathis when I was fourteen.

He was a sophomore, on the football team, when I caught his eye. He began walking me home from school, carrying my books. We playfully jostled each other along the way, like unruly school boys, in an awkward attempt to have physical contact without overtly doing so.

Late fall, my friend Connie and I hosted a party that, of course, included Whitey. As the party progressed, someone dimmed the lights and put Johnny Mathis on the hi-fi, though I'm not sure who.

It happened during *The Twelfth of Never*, at the song's climactic part when the violins build and Johnny sings, *Hold me close, never let me go*. That was when Whitey touched my chin and gently tilted it upward.

Here's where the camera slowly pans in for the close-up, lingering on details I analyzed for days afterward. Going back to the chin tilt, instead of dissolving mindlessly into an adolescent swoon, my brain lurched into high gear. "Don't blow it," I lectured myself. "Lips moist, slightly parted, just like you practiced with Connie in sixth grade!"

I was like an inexperienced understudy frantically rehearsing my part. Did I get my lines right? Sadly, no. The kiss was hard and flat. No soft, sensuous lingering. Nothing. It came. It went. And so did the walking home from school together. I was history. I blamed myself. I was the first-timer. I needed to get some experience. And I did.

Months later, I saw Whitey at a party. We danced for awhile and he asked to bring me home. As we rode through the darkened streets of Anaheim in the back seat of Jeff Greene's '57 Chevy, we tried again. And this time got it right.

Taking Flight
Dorothy Ross
 Davis CA

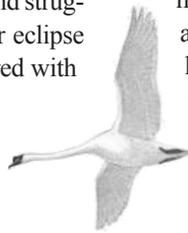


Amarillo was Georgia O'Keeffe's first home in the West and the lonesome countryside surrounding that city inspired some of her earliest stark landscapes. O'Keeffe wrote of the Texas Panhandle: "It is absurd the way I love this country." During the year my husband and I spent in Amarillo, while he worked on a highway project nearby, I also came under the seductive spell of that wide-open country.

Several days each week I volunteered at a hospice for the terminally ill. I was working there early one morning when MarJean, one of my favorite patients, took her last painful breaths. I needed a break. I got in my car and headed due north. It wasn't long before I reached the state border and, in another hour, I had crossed the Oklahoma Panhandle and entered Kansas. No need for road maps on the plains. I just drove parallel to the railroad tracks and headed for the next grain elevator. Those skyscrapers of the Great Plains act like lighthouses, beckoning the way to far-flung settlements.

On my return trip south, I paused to rest in the late afternoon at an Oklahoma state park. When I pulled into a campsite next to a small lake, I was amazed to see that the surface was covered with Canada geese. The great birds clustered on the water like a convoy of fat gray warships. It was eerily silent. Since my arrival had not disturbed the geese, I took a chance on getting out of the car to take a picture. One of the feathered sentinels, alerted by the noise from the car door, sounded an alarm. All at once hundreds of birds were flapping and honking and struggling to take flight. It was as though an unexpected solar eclipse had left me in darkness. The sky over my head was papered with gray and white streaks—and then they were gone.

It seemed as though MarJean's spirit rose along with those birds. I drove back home in the fading light, grateful that the heaviness on my heart had been lifted.



A song says fairy tales can come true. But fairy tales hold both horror and happiness. For example: youngest daughter is delivered to beast and prolongs his curse by disobeying him, then struggles to save the day, with help from others along the way. Beast turns into prince, prince and girl marry, everyone is happy. I lived the fairy tale in reverse.

My prince Charlie gave up on himself ten years into our marriage and began to live through our children. He wanted no interference from me. I learned to live with the extrusion, like the frog that learned to live with increasingly hot water until it killed him.

Ten years later Charlie, without anyone's knowledge or consent, cancelled his mother's apartment lease while she was hospitalized with advanced cancer, and moved her into our house. She thought that was hateful of him. I agreed. Imagining what growing old with Charlie would be like, I felt trapped and scared.

I can't adequately describe my helpers. They appeared from

Parkinson and Me
Brenda Carr
 Jonestown TX



"The only illness associated with micrographia is Parkinson's disease, but we will give you some physical tests to rule out other diagnoses too." This was the neurologist speaking in 2001. I thanked him and drove home. Tears streaming from my eyes, I waited for Bill to arrive home from work. I had always been healthy and the news was a great shock to me.

My husband Bill and I were in Dallas; our two children had graduated. Ruth, now married, was working on her Masters in Oklahoma, and Murray had a job in high tech in Austin. I was a licensed master social worker in a large psychiatric practice. Now I had another label, one I would love to have done without, but it was obviously not going to go away.

I will tell you a little of my experiences with my "label," for I am a very private person. I have been shattered at times with people's non-supportive and negative reaction. I was permitted to cut down my hours at work. I increased the amount of physical exercise I did regularly. I added yoga and now take Pilates. We were already sitting on an acre lot in the Texas Hill country and now we have lived in our home, with 36" doorframes and an elevator, for almost 18 months.

I joined the local Parkinson's group but felt uncomfortable in it, as my symptoms are so moderate in relation to some. So where does this leave me at present? Well, over the past year I have had a few bumps. My thyroid is now stable and I am to have a second opinion regarding my meds very soon. The last year has made me feel a lot more uncertain of my control of my situation as I had before, and it has changed the nature of the division of labor in our family. What I need is a head change so that I remain in charge and not the Parkinson's, but I have got to get my priorities right and look after myself emotionally and physically first.



Down in the Valley Where the Winds Blow
Diane Farone
 Green Valley AZ

somewhere beyond myself. I haven't experienced anything like it before or since. Each arrived at a time when I'd given up trying to figure out what to do. For want

of a better term I call them disembodied thoughts. *You just want to build a home*, was the first. Then came, *It's okay for you to have fun*, followed by, *You can't be responsible for Charlie's well-being*.

A few days later I was ready, tickets in hand, to take the children to a play. Charlie told them they couldn't go and then locked me out of his "family" conference with them. I remember yelling, "I can't wait to get out of here." Our oldest daughter begged me to patch things up.

I tried, but it was too late. I yearned to be free, like my paternal grandparents must have felt crossing the ocean toward Ellis Island. No one in our kingdom was happy, but the impasse was broken. Misery became a challenge to each of us to climb out of the valley.

More True Words

1961
Connie Gray
 Austin TX

I was three and my mother, Vera, was 23. After four husbands, she had four children. Birth control and social services were several years away from our small Texas town.

Hurricane Carla, a Category 5 storm, was set to hit our coastal town and over 500,000 people had evacuated. Not us, for we had no way to leave and nowhere to go. The courthouse was our protection during the storm. I remember hearing the winds howl as I reached up the silver water fountain in the hall. I filled a bottle and handed it to Leonard, the only real memory I have of my little brother.

Although the winds of Carla settled, other winds were brewing. Vera reactivated her “marry the next man” personal social services program and soon met Gene. Gene was headed out to Florida on his shrimp boat and invited Vera along to work. She entrusted us to a local family, and weeks later returned to find an empty house.

Her frantic search led her to social services and she was told that her children were in state custody, she was an unfit mother, and her parental rights had been terminated as she had abandoned her children. Vera showed money order receipts. The social worker was unmoved. Vera hired an attorney to argue the law, which stated there must be two years of abandonment, or neglect before a parent’s rights could be terminated. There was no protection in the courthouse that day. The attorney met with the judge and social worker, and immediately dropped her as a client. No one in our birth families met the high standards of the social worker and so we remained in the foster care system.

Manmade winds blew us apart: my sisters were adopted into separate homes, my little brother’s father claimed him, and I remained in state care. After six years and eight homes, I made the conscious choice to be adopted. I reasoned that one abusive family would be better than relocating every few months. I was adopted and winds stopped blowing me around when I was 18 and moved out.



Story of the Easter Straw
Amber Polo
 Camp Verde AZ

In 1952 my dad bought a bale of Easter straw for our neighborhood store. From the outside the burlap sack looked like pictures I’d seen of bales of cotton. How else would a kid from Milwaukee know what a cotton bale looked like? Inside the tight twisted, green cellophane was packed tight as a brick and just as heavy.

It was my job to separate the straw and fill small plastic bags. First, I stuck my hand into the scratchy bale and tried to grasp a handful of straw. I poked into the solid mass with stubby fingers, pried into the snarl, and tried to rip out small handfuls. Only wispy strands of cellophane—cold, sharp-edged, and slippery—came out in my hand.

When I at last had a good handful, I would open one of the small plastic bags, stuff the straw in, and quickly staple the bag shut. Static kept the straw from staying in the bag. I was always stapling some of the straw partway in and partway out.

How much straw to put in one bag? Dad always said, “Fluff it up and make the bag look full.” I thought that if I put in lots, the bale would be empty sooner.

Whenever I see green Easter straw, I think about that bale and the plastic bags in our store window with the Easter baskets, fluffy bunnies, and yellow chicks. Each year he made more money selling Easter straw than the entire bale cost. I remember how proud my dad was of his bale and the lessons he tried to teach me about business.

Did I ever empty the bale? Fifteen years later my dad sold the business. The bale was still full.



Black Blizzard
Linda Hoye
 Auburn WA

When my uncle passed away, all of his belongings were disposed of at a farm auction. In many ways, the auction marked the end of the road for that branch of the family tree. The only living descendants, my sister and I, had been adopted and so there were no blood ties left in that branch.

My uncle had lived his entire life in the same tiny house where my grandmother had raised three children alone, and there were generations of family history tucked away in the attic of the old house. Although not related by birth, this was the only family I knew, and the history that was disposed of in the auction was my own.

The day after the auction my husband and I drove across the Canadian prairie to return home, our van filled with pictures and other family memorabilia we had managed to rescue. Late in the afternoon the sky suddenly turned black. Our visibility diminished to virtually nothing as the wind picked up speed and dust filled the air, sandblasting the paint on our van. We kept going the best we could, afraid to stop in case another blinded driver hit us from behind. Eventually we managed to drive out of the storm, which we later learned was known as a Black Blizzard.

In retrospect, the Black Blizzard seems symbolic. The deaths of my grandmother, mother, aunt and uncle were all sudden and unexpected, much in the same way as the storm that overtook us. The wind blew strong and seemed overwhelming in its ferocity, like the emotions I had experienced with each loss. Pieces of my family history had been blown away and scattered to unknown destinations by the buyers at the auction, like the tumbleweeds that had blown across the road in front of us.

I am thankful that we attended the auction and had an opportunity to save some treasures valuable only to me, but I know that I will likely never return to that place. That piece of my life has come and gone, now just a distant memory like the Black Blizzard.





Tumbleweed
Zoe Climenhaga
 Manhattan KS

It was 2001 and I had just sold our home after my husband died. I was holed up in a trailer five miles from Mexico, watching tumbleweeds scurrying across the highway. Brown mountains nearby were sharp against a clear sky.

On September 11, my son phoned me from New York City to tell me he was okay. Then I switched off the tv and switched on my morning coffee-maker. Even a war left me numb, my life had changed so. The wind had blown me along a highway, another tumbleweed.

My sister asked, "What are you doing in this god-forsaken place?" We didn't agree. Five miles from the Mexican border was gorgeous: the sky was vast and the clouds constantly changed, but never blotted out the dazzling sun. I loved this sweeping valley—5,000 feet high—and my dwelling, a block from the base of the mountains.

I'd take long walks out in the desert with our old Malamute, Gussie. We walked the parched earth through prickly pear, cholla, spiky ocotillo, and mesquite, spotting deer and rabbits and sometimes a coyote. At night the javelinas, the strange wild pigs, rooted in the gardens. They had a musky strong odor. One brushed me one time, as it fled my yard, trundling off in the dark. The winds whipped us and tumbleweeds bounced and floated around us. Behind fences of dried ocotillo branches, the Mexican yards never had grass but were swept clean with brooms. Adobe shrines graced their barrenness. Roses were abundant even without much water. When tethered pit bulls roared at us, Gussie loftily ignored them, muttering only a low growl that infuriated them further.

Each night I wouldn't miss an incomparable show—the sunset. I'd pause out in the desert to inhale the clear air, staring transfixed at the colors rearranging the shadows of the clouds. Finally, calling the dog, we'd turn home. Some tumbleweed were stranded in the cactus while others blew off. I was changed now that I was alone, sustained by the sky and mountain and desert, wondering where the wind would carry me next.



11:30 PM Thoughts
Janan Hale
 Tyler TX

The moon looks strange, peeking in my kitchen window all orange and out of place at 11:30 PM, rising into the plush black sky. It's weird, but life is suddenly weird as well. It's turned around and full of uncertainty. Unwelcome change.

My beautiful mother, the fourth of six daughters, is now the only left of her family. It haunts her. She reminds herself and anyone who will listen that she now stands alone.

Tonight she thrashes around in our front bedroom seeking sleep. She is with us because she can no longer live unassisted. It shocks me to recognize the abilities she was once so capable of doing are now slipping away. It's awkward and embarrassing to admit that her loss of hearing angers me. I leave the room rather than sit with her and try to have conversation. The once strong woman barely has muscle tone to stand and, when she walks, she toddles. While living alone she gave up on food. Lost interest. It was too much trouble.

Becoming the mother of my own mother is frightening. Will I be able to serve?

With the Rain
Khadijah Lacina
 Shihr, Yemen



We recently made the difficult decision to leave our little Yemeni village in the mountains. It was a hot, dry, year, full of sickness, war, and hardships.

We were resting after the early afternoon prayer. I was half asleep, in that half-real world where what is going on around one can still penetrate the consciousness. I was sweaty and hot, and having trouble falling asleep, when I felt it: a whisper on the wind that stirred the white curtains on the window. I turned over onto my back and felt it again in a moment, stronger now, a breath this time that puffed the curtain over me like a cloud, and the smell of life, of home—the smell of rain. The wind came again, this time pushing his way into the room, establishing his presence with certainty. The curtains billowed and snapped and the rain began.

It was beautiful. Think of the desert: the hot, dry, desert. Think of heat and thirst and a longing for coolness—just a sip of water, a cool cloth on your neck. Think of longing for a loved one, just out of reach, for a dream, for a childhood moment lost in time. Then think of all that realized, brought to you, handed to you in the amazing gift of rain. The sameness, the day after day sameness of the drought was broken in a moment by this force, this blessing which brings innumerable other blessings.

I closed my eyes and felt the cool hand of my mother on my forehead, felt the feeling of home, of greenness, of age-old forests, leaves on a springy floor to run across, to breathe in, to roll around and jump in.

This moment had been forever, and will be forever, always within reach, if I allow myself to open up, to feel the pain of homesickness, of loss, in order to savor the taste of rain on my tongue, and to feel the connectedness again—to those who are gone before me, to the earth, to the sky, the fire, the water—to life.

The drought, for me, was truly over.

More True Words

Chrysalis
Carolyn Donnell
 San Jose CA



Struggling to exit that cocoon.
 Working hard,
 don't get out too soon.

I could help, slit with a knife.
 Cut it open,
 try to help that Life.

Yet if I do, it's all in vain.
 Butterfly,
 a caterpillar remains.

Without the striving, even pain,
 strength to live
 is never obtained.

When life's struggle seems too much,
 remember when
 chrysalis went untouched.

Strength needed for future life
 is formed
 inside the current fight.

Enough's Enough!
Helene Benardo
 Bronx NY

Change is not always progress! I'm no Luddite. I use antibiotics when necessary. My children were immunized against a host of horrors that we took our chances against when I was a girl. I love the computer—took to it like a long-lost friend.

However—however—they've gone too far. Phasing out books and newspapers? Since childhood, I have suffered severe withdrawal symptoms if I don't have at least two books ready to be opened as soon as I complete the one I'm reading.

When I'm in my favorite chair—
 When I'm on line anywhere—
 When I'm in a doctor's waiting room—
 When I have a few spare moments—
 Curl up with an "e-book"? Horrors!

Turning of Seasons
Maria Weber
 Buena Vista CO

Yesterday the north wind raged.
 Out of a green and ruby sunrise it charged as if to cleanse venom from the earth.
 Nothing alive moved: no chickadee, no junco, no jay, no raven, no deer.
 Horses at the end of our road stood stolid as stalagmites in a protective knot.
 Two snowstorms' worth of white fluff turned fiendish—colluded, compacted,
 Hardened into shrapnel that sliced across the land, scraping and reshaping.

This morning all is quiet.
 Our walkway, once a neat white canyon,
 Now blown shut and sealed with ice-hard crust.
 White dunes pile up behind orange plastic nets where
 Savvy neighbors installed snow fences.
 Ravens survey their playground from above:
 A pair fly wing to wing and claw to claw, calling *grrrak*, *grraack*.
 Our little birds hover around an empty feeder.
 Twenty-four hours of sheer survival and they are famished.

I circle the neighborhood on foot, not a soul in sight.
 Sun's early rays illuminate the western peaks in amber gold.
 I query a mountain that bears the name of an Ivy League university.
 What is my purpose, I ask, and wait for a revelation.
 My shadow shoots to forty feet as the sun disk rises behind me.
 In a golden shaft sits a wild rabbit. Motionless. Bathed in light. Watching me.



Blossoming
Joan Givens
 Bellevue NE

I remember exactly where I was when I made my decision. Thinking back, I'm surprised. I really had no power and my parents could have easily vetoed my plans. But they didn't.

Debbie Steele and I were walking down Ames Avenue, just after 3 PM. Our classes at North High School were out for the day.

"I'm going to Wayne State Teachers College in the fall," Debbie said. "Why not come with me? We could be roommates."

A whole new world blossomed right before my eyes, much like the spring flowers blooming next to the sidewalk on which we were walking. Such an idea had never occurred to me.

My plans were pretty much in place. I was enrolled at Omaha University, frequently called West Dodge High, because for those attending the school, life would continue much as it had in high school. I would live at home, attend classes, see my current friends, and live the life I had to this point.

But now new vistas seemed possible. I experienced a new revelation; I could try on a new me. I wouldn't be held to existing perceptions, past expectations, or unreasonable controls. I would have the freedom to start another chapter in my life, that of an independent young woman, living away from home and finding an expanding sense of self. I relished the idea, realizing, with surprise, that such a desire burned in me. It only had to be unleashed by Debbie's invitation.

ordinary be beautiful
Linda Sievers
 Arcata CA

The doctor who delivered my premature mother in 1913 stuck her in a shoebox and told my grandparents she wouldn't last the night. She survived to make the ordinary be beautiful, her whole life.

Multi-talented, her lyric soprano voice and excellent piano skills filled our house with music. Beaming, she'd cajole my dad into singing Jeanette McDonald and Nelson Eddy ballads.

Memories of their romantic duets still fire my heart.

At Christmas, Mom would gather used Kleenex boxes and artfully transform them into miniature houses. A small mirror became an icy pond framed by a wintry forest of entwined twigs. We placed a nativity scene on a hillside of angel hair near our Bethlehem village. A soft yellow light illuminated the sacred birth.

Together, we made the commonplace magical.

Mom tried to teach me to play classical piano and to sing soprano arias as effortlessly as she, but the sparks flew between us. Hyperactive, I much preferred to belt Elvis tunes while pedaling my bike for miles, or to spend my evenings and Saturdays at the dance studio. At eighteen, I left home in a passionate fury to create my own magic. Letters, phone calls, and visits sustained us through the years while mom taught voice, played the organ, and sang for her church, and I performed, choreographed, and taught dance.

One visit, I noticed the grand piano was layered in dust. As Mom gestured in conversation, I saw knobby, swollen fingers. Standing from her chair she faltered. I had to repeat myself often, to speak louder. Sadly, I realized mom could no longer hear herself sing or play the piano.

Phone calls followed from my brother. Mom has breast cancer. Mom broke her hip. Mom must go into a nursing home, her greatest fear.

Mom no longer hears my voice; no longer recognizes me as her child. Now, as I watch the nurse wheel my mother down the hall for her bath, I long to tell her that her love for beauty, her ability to make the ordinary be beautiful, inspired my whole life.

April is the Cruellest Month
Shelley Thrasher
 Orange TX



Year before last, my nephew,
 thirty-two years old,
 raced to work eagerly.

Captain Chaos, as they called him,
 itching to track illegals and drug traffickers,
 leapt into his small Border Patrol plane,
 didn't wait for his partner.

He climbed toward the hot South Texas sun,
 spotted movement in the spiny cacti,
 sharp rocks below.

As he swooped like an eagle,
 two hundred feet from the ground,
 a fierce, freak gust caught him.

Upside down, without lift,
 in three seconds
 he plummeted and crashed.

His wife and two young daughters,
 my brother and sister-in-law—
 we all crashed with him.

Two long years later,
 we have spun our tears
 into a silver, silken filament,
 wrapped it around a glossy magnolia leaf,
 flung it into the bright heights
 that always lured him skyward.

It glides on the breeze,
 races upward as he did.

Now he is part of our connection
 to a golden, glowing realm.



Thank You for Your Generosity....

Lucy Ann Albert
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 Jean Erlar
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 Shirley Ferry
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In honor of...
Penny Appleby, by Joyce Boatright
Judy Whelley, by M'Liss Moore
Jane Ross, by Patricia Pando
Judy Whelley, by Mary Lou Pringle

39 donors have given \$4867 in the last year to Story Circle Network



More True Words

Desert Morning
Susan Weidener
 Tucson AZ



Finger Rock is a slim shaft of mountain that, like a bony finger, points to the sky. As I sipped my coffee I breathed in the clean cool air of the desert morning in Tucson, Arizona. I had traded in a view of the forsythia bushes that John had planted in our backyard for a view of mountains and barrel cactus sprouting caps of yellow flowers. In the distance the saguaro stood like sentinels of the landscape against the backdrop of a high blue sky.

I had left my job and come to the desert. If I was careful, there was enough to get by. I could write, volunteer for an environmental or women's group. Life would go on, hopefully with serenity and peace for what had been and what might be.

The Indians believed that the giant saguaros were people frozen in the desert. I liked to imagine that somewhere the souls of two lovers inhabit the saguaro and as the sun sets over the Tucson basin their cries of ecstasy can be heard resonating forever.

Would I search for John here among the rocks and the coyotes? Would I drink the desert air for him like the bats drink the saguaro nectar on those single blooming flowers one night of the year? Sometimes, I think I am still living for the two of us, doing my part in a preordained dance.

I had decided to sell the house back in Pennsylvania where John and I had raised our children. The house where the tiny forsythia bushes he planted the first year we moved in with our boys now grew in wild profusion.

In a way the family has changed little since you died, I wrote in my reporter's notebook. Often it is as if you are still with me. Over the years it has been easy to talk to our sons about you. I wanted to tell them about the man you had been because they had been cheated of you. I felt if I ever stopped remembering you then I had let you go.



Fighting Boreas
Arlene V. R. Howard
 Rancho Mirage CA

When I awoke that morning, my first thought was to hide under covers. Was the wind that was beginning to howl affecting my well being? I heard a loud meow and a woof. "Enough already. We're hungry."

After breakfast, my dog, Nala, and I went for a walk. The wind began to churn harder. *Better take the patio umbrellas down*, I thought.

At noon, it was time for Nala and me to go out again. Pain in my back and legs cut the walk short. I called my husband Alan, who was at work. "I can't stand up straight."

I rested on the sofa and awoke to the buzz of the doorbell. It took a while to hobble to the door. A painter had come to give me an estimate. He had to hold me up though he did not know me, nor I him. What was happening to me?

"Come home, Alan." The next two days found me writhing in pain yet, after a week, I was okay.

Storm Warning
Betsy Kelleher
 Granite City IL

The weather was nice until that phone call blew my way. It was my son, the middle one of three, calling from an ICU to tell me he was "not doing so well." Then his wife took the phone and actually said that word. *Cancer.*

It was confirmed as Multiple Myeloma. How could that happen? He had complained last summer of back pain and his doctor prescribed physical therapy. He finally tried a chiropractor, who said his pain wasn't normal and he should get an MRI. He also had fractured bones with very little reason. Why couldn't his doctor have taken all this seriously? But who would guess a 45-year-old young man would have a rare type of cancer more prevalent among older men?

Multiple Myeloma is a cancer of the blood plasma cells in the bone marrow. It attacks the bones like termites. It causes anemia and kidney failure. My son had all the full blown symptoms when he entered the ER that Sunday in mid-November.

Two months later, the winds around me are variable from total stillness without hope to fearful gusts of anxiety! The doctors are still encouraging, but every time I talk to my son, his voice sounds weaker. I have searched the Internet for information and I know too much.

I watch and wait for tornado-force disaster. Several times my hope had totally blown away leaving only a lonely void, but then I felt God's fresh breeze of encouragement through an email, a Scripture verse, a song, or just a sensing of His strengthening Presence.

I pleaded fervently for a Christmas miracle. Now I pray quietly for God's will for my son and for our whole family.

This week, the doctors stopped dialysis and will try chemotherapy instead of the myeloma drugs they have been giving him. They will begin meds to increase bone density and inject a special "cement" into the five compression fractures in his spine for stability. That and morphine may reduce his terrible pain. A gentle breeze of hope again caresses my aching grief.



Eight months later, the pain in my back and upper legs returned; this time it was more severe and lasted longer. Visits to doctors, MRIs, and CT scans provided me with a diagnosis: I wasn't thirty anymore. Realizing this was as scary as the pain. My body had gotten old on me. How dare it! Compression of the discs in my spine was the cause of the pain. Therapy was recommended. A walker and a wheel chair became my companions.

I learned that a water therapy center was located nearby. It offers classes that can help strengthen my body's core muscles. We sing to music and laugh while we move the weights and our bodies through the 91-degree water. No wheel chair and walker for me now!

One of my favorite nursery rhymes begins with: *The north wind doth blow and we shall have snow, And what shall poor robin do then, poor thing?* What I am doing as the wind of age blows into my body is fighting old Boreas, the Greek god of the north wind, with water therapy.

Living in a Tourist Court**Elaine Adams**

Austin TX

**When the Ink Ran Out****Judie Hansen**

Eugene OR

I was nine when my family moved from a decent housing project in Luling to a run-down tourist court in San Antonio. I can still see the place perfectly. In front of our door, there was a concrete porch, where our dog had puppies in a cardboard box. The “living” room had a double bed and a vinyl couch that made into an uncomfortable bed. My mother slept in the bed, my dad on the couch. Unaware that it was strange, my sister and I took turns sleeping with each parent. On one wall was a small, built-in closet with one drawer for our clothes. The bathroom was next to that and then a tiny kitchen with a table barely big enough for all of us.

Every weekday, my sister and I walked to school. Once I took a sack lunch consisting of only a small piece of cake and some cold, leftover French fries, but could not eat it because I was too embarrassed. After school and at night, we would play hide-and-seek, catch lightning bugs in a jar, or swing in a small, weed-filled playground.

I have only two fond memories of that dreary place: our family playing rummy together at the little kitchen table and Daddy buying ice cream for our supper from the ice cream man. Unfortunately, Daddy was gone a lot and often came home drunk. Life was getting worse, but soon everything would change dramatically.

That summer, my parents’ marriage ended. Daddy wanted to return to Kansas City, his birthplace, but Mama did not want to go as she believed the cold weather would make her sick. Daddy went anyway, leaving my mother alone, without a car and very little money. My dear grandfather came for his daughter and took her back to her childhood home in Encinal. Even though Mama had not taught in years, she was hired to teach at the elementary school. I believe that is when my real life began.

Beginning with *The Artist’s Way*, I have been a great fan of Julia Cameron’s books and they usually jump start my creative juices. I have dutifully gone on artist’s dates and completed short writing exercises, but the Morning Pages were always a struggle.

Recently, I decided to give those wretched morning pages another try. Writing away before dawn, my ballpoint pen ran out of ink mid-sentence. A nearby pencil was blunt and I still had two full pages to go. So I climbed from beneath a warm comforter and went to my office for another pen. Back in bed, I started to write about the pen with no ink.

I am not surprised this pen ran out of ink. I got it free at the bank 15 years ago. Until now, it was in constant use and never failed to produce a strong, bold line on paper.

Old pen, how many miles of words has it been since you came into my life? Oh, the stories you could tell about me as I begrudgingly mumbled along with my morning pages over the years. Old entries are tucked away in files with secrets never shared. Some were a great struggle and others flowed on to paper—written truths never spoken.”

I bet this pen was confused, tucked away in a box, riding in the belly of a blazing hot moving van for 2000 miles in the August heat. If it had a brain, it might have thought about being dormant, fearing it may dry up completely before being used again...much like my sex life. That pen probably has a stronger desire to write than I do for having sex. I suppose if a pen can lay dormant inside a dark box for years and then can write after a little encouragement, it might work the same for me. I wonder....



Susan Wittig Albert Lifewriting Contest 2009

Contest Entries Accepted May 18 through July 1

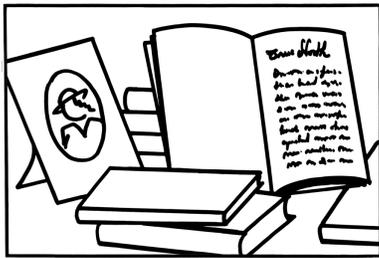
SCN is proud to announce its tenth annual lifewriting competition, named in honor of SCN founder, Susan Wittig Albert. This year’s topic focuses on Obstacles. Here are some wise words to help you get started:

“About the only value the story of my life may have is to show that one can, even without any particular gifts, overcome obstacles that seem insurmountable, if one is willing to face the fact that they must be overcome.” ~Eleanor Roosevelt

Write about a time when you were faced with what you just knew was too much for you to overcome—a time when you felt totally ill-equipped to handle what life had thrown your way. Write about the ways in which you approached the situation, the fears you had to deal with, the twists and turns that you had to make to come to a resolution of the situation. Write about how and when you first realized that you did, indeed, have what was neces-

sary to overcome your particular hurdle. Write about how doing so changed your life. Be sure to include what you learned about yourself along the way. (Thanks to Lee Ambrose for this prompt!)

The contest will be coordinated by SCN Board President Joyce Boatright. Details and contest entry form online at <http://www.storycircle.org/Contests>. Look for more details in the June Journal and in our upcoming monthly e-letters.



Story Circle Network's Book Reviews *Books for the Journey*

Story Circle Network hosts the most substantial women's book review site on the web. Read hundreds of reviews of books by, for, and about women. New reviews are added almost daily. www.storycirclebookreviews.org.

January's Review of the Month:



The House at Sugar Beach
by Helene Cooper

(Simon and Schuster, 2008.
ISBN 978-0-7432-6624-6)

Reviewed by Mary Jo Doig

New York Times' diplomatic correspondent Helene Cooper has written a simply stunning memoir of her African childhood in *The House at Sugar Beach*.

Cooper has penned the story of her Liberian childhood, its affluence brought about by the choices of her

ancestors: newly-freed, early nineteenth-century slaves who returned to Africa, purchased large tracts of land, and built the new nation of Liberia. In that process, they transformed their lives from former slaves into wealthy cabinet leaders in many areas of Liberia's government. This beautiful memoir is also the story of Cooper and her adopted sister, Eunice, a child of Liberia's poverty, who was brought into the Cooper's home as a companion for Helene.

In her teen years, life abruptly changed for Cooper when the Liberian leaders were violently overthrown in a coup. Her prominent uncle's execution was filmed and then shown on television. Cooper's father became a wanted man. When soldiers came to pillage the huge house at Sugar Beach, Cooper's mother instructed the girls to stay in their room while she went into the cellar. There, we later learn, she submitted to a gang rape so the soldiers would leave her daughters untouched.

When the Coopers fled Liberia for the United States, Eunice returned to her natural family and their grinding poverty. Decades passed while Cooper adapted to life in the US, completed high school in Tennessee, graduated from college, became a journalist, and started writing for a small New England newspaper. There she wrote the haunting story of her natural sister's escape from Liberia, which drew a job offer from the *Wall Street Journal*, and launched her successful career.

In time, assigned to stories all over the world, Cooper had a near-death experience while covering the Iraq war. As she lay injured, she reflected that Iraq was not the place where she wanted to die. In a moment of truth, she understood that the Iraq war reminded her of the Liberian war two decades earlier, and she decided to return to Liberia and find Eunice.

If you, like me, have possessed fairly limited knowledge of Liberia's history, you will learn so much about Cooper's homeland. And, if you happen to be a woman, like me, working on (or considering) writing a memoir, you will both appreciate and well utilize many of the wise, varied suggestions from Cooper's family members that are described at the end of the book. Their collective wisdom helped Cooper transform her story from what started as a journalistic report into one of a tender, deeply moving memoir.

The House at Sugar Beach is easily the best book I have read this year. I plan to read it again soon.



Meet Mary Jo Doig

Mary Jo is our SCN Journal's "True Words" editor. She is a long-time member of the Internet Chapter, where she facilitates Writing e-Circle #7, participates in e-Circle #2, and is also active in the reading e-Circle. Mary Jo tells us about herself:

I discovered my passions of reading and writing in early grade school and they have added a rich dimension and grace to my life that I could not have discovered anywhere else. A wonderful extension of those passions has been the time I spend each calendar quarter with our members' True Words for the Story Circle Journal. It is both an awesome and honored feeling to enter into the words of each piece and be with the writer as she shares her unique story or poem.

And so I say "thank you" to each woman who sends in her work. If you are a new member or one who hasn't yet sent in a piece, please look up the theme for the next Journal's True Words and do not hesitate to write your story. For your words are, indeed, a joy each time I discover a new submission in my mailbox!

Join Our Review Team

We're looking for strong reviews of books by, for and about women. If you'd like to join our review team, check out our guidelines by following the link on the Book Review Home Page, www.storycirclebookreviews.org.



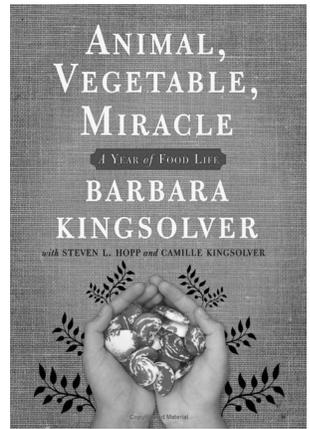
SCN Lifewriters Yahoo!Group News *Join Our First Online Reading Group Discussion*

Dani Greer

Do you know how to make homemade mozzarella cheese? Have you ever wanted to learn how? At this point you might be asking yourself what on earth these questions have to do with Story Circle Network and lifewriting, but if you stick with me a few moments, it will all come to light.

Last month, the members of the SCN lifewriters Group chose Barbara Kingsolver's enormously popular book, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* as its favorite memoir for 2008.

In this evocative book, Kingsolver chronicles her family's attempts to eat only locally available foods – what they could grow themselves or found available in their local farmers' markets. Not only does Kingsolver document her own views and feelings, but she enlists her family to share their experiences, creating something of a family record. The book is also chock-full of well-researched food industry data, and it's no surprise that the contents have inspired an entire "locavore" movement. I became serious about it myself and created an online group to share experiences, because it's not a frivolous hobby by any means. It takes hard and dedicated effort.



The SCN Lifewriters Group will now have its first online reading group discussion. We'll read *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* and join in a round of lively guided conversation, as well as share our locavore challenges and views from our many home regions. I'm sure we'll all try some of the recipes Kingsolver shares in the book, which includes the mozzarella I mentioned above. (Mine came from the raw milk of local cows, so my "food miles" were incredibly low, resulting in a true locavore experience.)

Sound interesting? Join us for the discussion at:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/scnlifewriters>.

You can also read reviews of *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* at Story Circle Network Book Reviews online at:

<http://www.storycirclebookreviews.com>.

That should whet your appetite for an intriguing concept and a new spring project that will give you even more interesting thoughts to put in your lifewriting journals.

How I Discovered Story Circle Network *Finding the Value of My Voice*

Tricia Stephens, Carrollton TX

The first time I met Susan Albert was in the summer of 1997 when I saw her standing near her herb beds with her dog, Zach. She didn't see me because I was over 200 miles away in Fort Worth, Texas reading about her in the *Dallas Morning News*.

I started reading the article because the teaser "murder, mystery and marjoram from a Hill Country writer" was about things I cared about—mysteries, herbs, and Texas. Reading the article I found that other ways I related to Susan were: an interest in tarot, astrology, meditation, and history; also, the fact she had a lab, her unhappiness with climbing the corporate ladder, that she and her husband were looking for a life they could both enjoy, and that she wanted to promote the voice of women. I signed up for *China's Garden*, her herb journal, right away.

In *China's Garden* I read recipes, reviews of books on herbs, updates of the new SCN. I met China Bayles, Ruby Wilcox, and other Pecan Springs' residents from Susan's mystery series. Soon I was buying the mystery books, reading about Texas, and loving a heroine I could cheer for. A few months later I joined Story Circle to reclaim my own writer's voice while balancing

my life as a mom, a business professional, and a newly married 45-year-old woman.

A year later I left a career that had defined and trapped me for 20 years, to be at home with a pre-teen daughter and to adopt another child. Story Circle was a voice of reassurance that I could do something totally against the rules I'd always followed, that I could follow my dreams, that I could find life outside of work. During those first months, while feeling out of place at home, I'd read stories by women telling me about their struggles, heartaches, and joys. Their voices were soothing and I felt I'd found the sisters I'd wished for growing up as an only child.

I've been a part of a writing circle since 2001. Here I get encouragement, feedback, and a strong community of writing sisters. Reading the stories of others, I hear the things that are true for me and I see things that, without the promptings, I would miss.

I don't believe there are accidents in life, but rather there is a big plan; and though often I do not see where the plan is going I know if I let myself go, my inner wisdom will keep me on the path. Story Circle has been a light and companion on my path to finding the value of my voice.

Continued from page 9

Getting Your Work Published In the Journal

Word limit. *True Words* space in the Journal is generous yet cannot accommodate all submissions. I want to publish as many stories and poems as I can fit into our allotted pages and thus I adhere very strictly to the 350 word limit.

New writers. If I receive two stories that meet the criteria and one is by a previously SCN published writer while the other is by a new, unpublished member, I tend to give priority to the new member. Over the years, a few women, disappointed because their stories were not published, have expressed their feeling that it's the established members only who are published. That is never my objective and in fact, all things—again—being fairly equal, the new member's chances for publication the next time she submits a story are greatly increased.

Geographical location. Since Texas is the SCN birthplace, I feel quite certain, though I've not counted, that the majority of our members live in Texas. That fact is often reflected in the percentage of stories from Texas women. Yet as one of my final checks before compiling my pages, I review my choices, to see that I've given enough balance to geographical locations of all our members.

Similar stories/poems. It doesn't happen often, but occasionally I receive more than one piece with the same broad theme. For example, three members might respond to the prompt "The Winds of Change" by sending in a story or poem about their mother's death. When that happens, I look back to my other criteria to choose which one to publish. After reflection, I have sometimes published more than one story or poem with a similar theme.

The Journal's *True Words* section is intended to showcase the life-writing stories and poems of SCN members only. As such it offers the highest probability of publication that I know of, for both new as well as previously-published writers.

I think back several years to that January in 2001 when I first joined SCN. I soon learned the *True Words* submission deadline was close. The prompt topic (animals) intrigued me and I sat down to write my story, *Leaving the Farm*. The first draft was about 850 words. By the time I edited it down to 350 words, I was sure I had lost too much of heart of the story. Nevertheless I sent it in and soon heard back from Susan Albert, not only accepting the story (to my surprise and deep pleasure), but also offering her thoughts about the story's strengths.

When the February 2001 *Journal* arrived a month later and I saw my words in print, with the wonderful stories by other women, my writing-confidence deficit began to improve. I pulled that old *Journal* out again today to take another look and—you know—all those pleasant old feelings rose up again.

Thus, in the final analysis, it is a replication of that experience—a very positive experience with honest feedback—that I seek to give each woman who sends in her *True Words*.

Continued from page 1

Join us for LifeLines: A Story Circle Life Writing Retreat

May 15-17, 2009 • Festival Hill, Round Top TX

Join us for a women-only weekend lifewriting retreat, led by Lisa Dale Norton, at the beautiful Festival Hill.

Located in historic Round Top, Texas, 75 miles east of Austin, The International Festival-Institute was founded in 1972 by world-renowned concert pianist James Dick and has developed superb year-round education and performance programs. It has also created a unique 200-acre campus—Festival Hill—containing major performance facilities, historic houses, extensive gardens, parks and nature preserves. Through its singular collection of rare books, manuscripts, archival material, music and historic recordings, photographs and objects, the Festival-Institute is also known as an important center for research and scholarly study. Planted with thousands of trees and bushes of various species, Festival Hill offers visitors lakes, picnic areas, jogging trails, and wonderful herb gardens.

We'll have double-occupancy accommodations (two twin beds in each room). Dinner on Friday evening, 3 meals on Saturday (including continental breakfast), continental breakfast on Sunday, and drinks/snacks during breaks are included.

Registration fees for this weekend retreat are \$375 for SCN members, \$395 for non-members. The fee includes two nights in a double-occupancy room and five meals. For a single-occupancy room, the rate is \$25/night higher (\$425 for members; \$445 for non-members). Participants have the option of an on-your-own Sunday night stayover. Double-occupancy rate for this extra night is \$55; single-occupancy rate is \$80.

For complete details and registration information visit the website: www.storycircle.org/LifeLines. Or, complete the registration form on page 23.

Summary of Board Meeting January 11, 2009

Highlights from the January Board Meeting:

- We continue to make progress towards the launch of the editorial service. The selection committee chose Matilda Butler and Kendra Bonnett to serve as the project's developers and coordinators.
- We approved new board members, Jeanne Guy, Linda Hoye, Martha Meacham, Johnnet Scogin, and Judy Whelley.
- We selected committee chairs for our 2010 Conference Stories from the Heart V. Volunteers are still needed for the following committees: Door Prizes/Goodie Bags/Silent Auction, Hospitality, Registration, Signage/Name Tags, Sponsors, and Volunteer Coordinator.

REGISTRATION FORM

LifeLines:
A Story Circle Life Writing Retreat
 May 15-17, 2009 • Festival Hill, Round Top TX

Copy this page and send with your check to:
 Conference Registration,
 Story Circle Network,
 PO Box 500127, Austin TX 78750.
 To register online and use your credit card, go to www.storycircle.org/LifeLines
 and click the link to Registration.

Name: _____ Phone Number: _____

Street Address: _____

City: _____ State/Province: _____

Country: _____ Zip Code: _____ Email Address: _____

Check here to request vegetarian lunch/dinners:

Extra Fees:

Single room:

I want a single-occupancy room for Fri & Sat nights for \$50 extra.

Extra night (Sunday):

I want a double-occupancy room for \$55 extra.

I want a single-occupancy room for \$80 extra.

Are you currently a member of the Story Circle Network? Yes / No

Non-members who choose to join prior to the end of the retreat will have a portion of their registration fee applied to their dues!

Refund Policy:

Cancellations are accepted until April 15, 2009, and are subject to a cancellation fee of \$50. After April 15, we will refund your money only if we are able to fill your place from our waiting list.

Questions? Contact us via email: storycircle@storycircle.org or phone: **512-454-9833**



This membership is a gift.

My name and address:

My phone and e-mail:

Join the Story Circle Network!

Annual Membership:

- _____ USA: \$35
- _____ Canada & Mexico: \$45 (International MO)
- _____ International \$50 (International MO)
- _____ Internet Chapter: \$18/yr (in addition to your national dues)
- _____ Sample copy of the *Story Circle Journal*: \$5

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

3/09

Name _____

Address _____

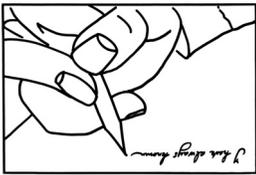
City _____ State _____ Zip _____ - _____

Phone _____

Email _____ Amount enclosed _____

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

- \$70 Supporter \$125 Sponsor \$200 Patron \$400 Benefactor



True Words *Looking Ahead*

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. Members only please. Here are the upcoming topics and deadlines:

***Pets*—June 2009 (due April 15)**

***The Blessings of a Burden*—September 2009 (due July 15)**

***Simplicity*—December 2009 (due October 15)**

If you can send your writing via email or as a Word attachment, the editors will love you. If you type your story on an Internet computer, all you need to do is **highlight** the text, **copy** it, and **paste** it directly into an email message. (This will eliminate lots of extra typing!) Send your work to Mary Jo Doig: email maryjo_d@yahoo.com

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

Mark Your Calendar *SCN Events & Deadlines*

March is National Women's History Month

April 15: Deadline for **June Story Circle Journal** submissions. True Words theme: "Pets"

April 15: Last day to **register for LifeLines Writing Retreat**

May 15-17: LifeLines Writing Retreat with Lisa Dale Norton, Round Top, Texas.

May 18: LifeWriting Competition opens.



July 1: Submission deadline for *The Susan Wittig Albert LifeWriting Competition*.

July 15: Deadline for **September Story Circle Journal** submissions. True Words theme: "The Blessings of a Burden"



SAVE THE DATE
Stories from the Heart V
February 5-7, 2010

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

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We're ganging up on facebook. To join us, look for storycircle@storycircle.org on facebook, click on "Join" and you're in!