

STORY CIRCLE JOURNAL

The newsletter for women with stories to tell...



Stories from the Heart V

The Story Circle Network National Conference

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

—Beth Mende Conny

**February 5-7, 2010
Wyndham Hotel, Austin, Texas**



**Friday night Keynote Speaker,
Heather Summerhayes Cariou**



**Sunday lunch Speaker,
Mary Gordon Spence**

Mark your calendars and start making plans now to join us in Austin for the fifth National Conference of Story Circle Network!

Stories from the Heart V will bring women from around the country to celebrate our stories and our lives. Through writing, reading, listening, and sharing, we will discover how personal narrative can be a healing art, how we can gather our memories, and how we can tell our stories. We welcome readers, writers, storytellers, and any woman with a past, present, and future. There will be opportunities to explore difficult or hidden issues, expand our relationships with other women, and discover different modes and media—such as art, dance, and drama—for sharing our stories.

Our Keynote Speakers

Our Friday-night keynote speaker, **Heather Summerhayes Cariou**, was born and raised in Ontario, trained at the National Ballet School of Canada, and was a founding member of the Ontario Youtheatre and the Center for Actor's Study in Toronto. She enjoyed a professional acting career for twenty years across Canada and off-Broadway. She now lives on the Hudson River in New Jersey with a view of New York City and is working on a novel and co-producing the feature film "Make Believe" with her husband, stage and screen actor Len Cariou. Visit her website, <http://www.sixtyfiverosesthebook.com>

Mary Gordon Spence, our Sunday lunch speaker, has taught kindergarten to college, written Texas history materials, drafted legislation, directed statewide environmental programs and worked for a former president and has been a magazine editor. Her storytelling, ukulele playing, wit and wisdom have been legendary throughout her career. Visit her website, <http://www.askmarygordon.com>

Our Hotel

Wyndham Hotel
3401 South IH-35, Austin TX 78741
512-448-2444 / fax: 512-443-4208
www.wyndham.com/hotels/AUSWC

Our Website

www.storycircle.org/Conference
Register online or use the form on page 23.

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Letter From SCN's President— Joyce Boatright

I believe absolutely in the power of paying it forward and giving back. It's a circular concept, just like Story Circle. And the concept is quite powerful indeed.

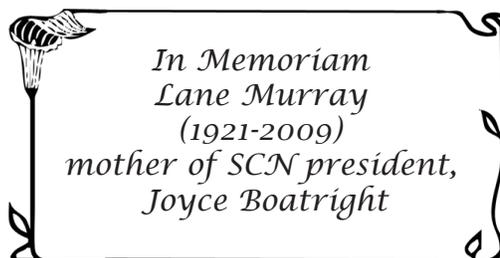
As we face tough decisions in these economic hard times and you divvy your money among charitable organizations, please put Story Circle Network on your 2009 list to receive monetary support. Story Circle Network is a 501(c)(3) organization, which means your contributions are tax-exempt to the full extent of the law; therefore, it makes good tax sense to donate to SCN.

But more importantly, your donation infuses vitality and strengthens our unique mission. We are an organization that inspires women to give voice to their personal stories. Our activities are funded by the annual dues of our members and through our educational activities. In order to keep costs down—our members are not among the rich and richest—we especially need contributions to our annual fund. The fundraising goal this year is not astronomical. If every member gives *something*—as modest a gift as \$10—we will make our goal.

Where will we spend your money? We will spend the money on Stories of the Heart IV, the 2010 national conference, keeping down costs so more of you can come to Austin and hear from authors, memoir writing teachers and life-writers. (We've already reduced the registration fee, and hope to have more to fund subsidies.) We will spend it to pay the dues of women in shelters or in prison so their voices and stories can be heard in story circles of their making and through publication in the *Story Circle Journal*. We will spend it to pay for the professional services of talented women so you can access the support you need in giving voice to *your* stories through the SCN website and its publications.

We are an organization with a volunteer working board, so you reap the benefits of having 17 thoughtful women acting good stewards of your money. While your membership dues help, they represent only a fraction of the costs of running a national organization. Help us keep dues and conference fees affordable by adding another twenty to the kitty.

Oprah Winfrey says, "I don't think you ever stop giving. I really don't. I think it's an ongoing process. And it's not just about being able to write a check. It's being able to touch somebody's life." Well, guess what, ladies? Writing a check to the SCN Annual Fund, no matter how nominal, will also touch somebody's life. Your check will help us keep the stories alive.



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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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.

Story Circle Network National Conference, continued from page 1

See the hotel website for more information: www.wyndham.com/hotels/AUSWC/ To get the conference rate (\$99/night plus tax, double occupancy), call the hotel directly (512-448-2444) and make your reservations no later than January 16, 2010. Room rate includes complimentary airport shuttle service, parking, and high speed wireless internet. Need a roommate? See the **Room-mates Wanted!** web page on the conference website.

Sisters Helping Sisters

If you are a member of SCN and have an annual family income of \$50,000 or less, you may apply for a conference scholarship. These will be awarded in amounts ranging from \$75 to the full conference cost, depending on need and the availability of funds. Additionally, we may be able to assist with travel/lodging (but we can't confirm the availability of travel/lodging money until January, 2010). To apply, go www.storycircle.org/Conference/frmregister.php or write to us, telling us how much aid you need (for registration, childcare, travel/lodging). Tell us about yourself and your reasons for applying for a scholarship. One of the objectives of Stories from the Heart V is to return to our communities and share our discoveries with others. In approximately 200 words, explain how you will help the SCN achieve this objective.

Scholarship awards will be based on perceived need, the thoughtfulness of your response, and your interest in sharing what you learn in your community (for example, by starting a writing circle or developing other women's story-sharing activities).

If you request a subsidy, you must pay a \$75 deposit towards your conference fees. If you receive a subsidy, you will then pay the remaining fee (the \$220 full conference fee, minus the subsidy, minus your \$75 deposit). This amount must be paid by **January 1, 2010**. If you do not receive an award your deposit will be returned or applied to your full registration.

Call for Vendors: Works of Heart Marketplace

Stories from the Heart V is looking for vendors (including small publishers) who would like to sell their own books, paper products, print-related services, writing-related items, and hand-crafted items of interest to women. We will have a limited number of tables available in a reserved shopping area. Vendor sales will be Saturday only. Fees are \$40 for a 6'x30" full table and \$20 for a 3'x30" half table. If you plan to apply, please be aware that it takes 4-6 weeks to obtain a Texas permit (required to complete your application), so start early!

Deadline: December 1.

Notification of acceptance: December 15.

Full details and application form at:

www.storycircle.org/Conference/frmvendorapp.shtml

Be Our Guest!

Susan Wittig Albert & Susan Tweit Book Signing

November 2, 2009 · 7-9pm

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

Be Our Guest by Penny Appleby

On a Sunday afternoon in June in Austin, writers from Story Circle Network and story tellers from the Central Texas Story Telling Guild came together to share in a program of story reading and story telling. This event was the latest in a series of events organized by Austin Story Circle members. They are called Be Our Guest.

Be Our Guest events began as a way of introducing women in Austin to Story Circle and encouraging membership. Over the years, the programs have featured story readings from various circles, talks by authors, and even a musical program designed to get everyone on their feet singing. The two-hour events include time to visit while enjoying light refreshments, and to participate in an interesting program designed around some aspect of telling our stories.

Story Circle is encouraging other areas to host their own Be Our Guest events. All that is needed is for someone to agree to pull some volunteers together to handle the logistics. These include securing a meeting place, spreading the word about the event, and coordinating simple refreshments, such as tea, coffee, water and cookies. The program can be as easy as inviting people to come prepared to read a story.

In Austin, most of our events are held at locations that do not charge for the space, or charge a nominal amount. Most of the refreshments are provided by members. However, Story Circle is willing to underwrite a minimal cost for the event. If you would like some assistance from Story Circle, send an e-mail to storycircle@storycircle.org and outline what you want to do and what you need from us.

If you think this is a good idea for your area, but still have some questions, please contact Penny Appleby at penny.appleby@sbcglobal.net.

Dont miss the next Be Our Guest event! See the box at left.



Penny Appleby addresses a room full of interested—and interesting—storytellers at the June Be Our Guest event.

Congratulations to the Winners of the Susan Wittig Albert 2009 LifeWriting Competition!

Winners for the competition were chosen for their freshness and originality, the clarity and authenticity of the author's voice, and responsiveness to the topic. Read their winning stories on pages 4-8.

The Spirit of Cherry Pie

by Mary Lee Fulkerson, Reno NV

"It's easy, mom!" My daughter, Cathy, pushed the heavy door to my new domain: the University of Nevada art department. I smiled to hide my panic as Cathy hurried to class, unaware she was the reason for my dropping out 20 years earlier—colleges in the 50's did not welcome pregnant women. And now my wonderful daughter gave me the courage to return.

I smelled wet plaster and oil paint, and my fluttering stomach reminded me I was about to enter a realm where passion was again possible. But could I do it? Could I recapture that old bliss that gave my life such meaning?

At forty, I wondered if it was too late. The fearless girl who once raced a bucking horse alongside a clattering freight train, who tried to swim across Lake Tahoe in the nude—this wild girl was long gone, replaced by the dutiful Military Officer's wife, relegated to the status of temporary guest on any army post. Who, when stationed in Germany, needed her husband's permission to obtain a driver's license. Who became the perfect army wife, knowing when to remove one white glove in the receiving line and the correct number of calling cards to leave in the silver tray when calling upon the commanding general and his wife. The husband left two cards and the wife, one, for a lady (me) never, ever called upon a gentleman (the general).

I was through with that woman. She bored me to death.

I dodged my way down the crowded hall to sculpture class. I was majoring in art and minoring in journalism this time. I blushed when my advisor smirked that I was one of the oldest students in both fields.

Fortunately, I found Darlene, a fellow "oldie", and we discovered the miracles of sculpture together. We filed a block of plaster into a perfect egg and shared our terror of the welder's sparks. We had two things in common: our age and our ecstatic awakening to all possibility in art. Soon we were going for coffee together. I was curious about Darlene, since her colorful language put my tame and proper speech to shame. She would fingercomb her wispy mane of faded red hair and let loose with a line of cuss words that even the lumberjacks I knew in childhood never used. Every time she said the word "fuck" my face burned like a firecracker on the Fourth of July, and it was all I could do not to run screaming from the room. Yet she was, like me, desperate to learn, and I found myself drawn to her. We were two seekers discussing Louise Nevelson (her favorite) and Eva Hesse (mine).

One day Darlene mentioned her former job, and I asked about it.

"I was a hooker."

"Oooohhhhh." OMG, I was friends with a prostitute! As usual, there went my face, getting hot as all sorts of questions came forward. How could she? It must have been horrible. Or was it? But I, ever the polite military wife, didn't ask.

In the Journalism department, a new professor arrived. Bill Jones, an Associated Press reporter, wanted to produce a brilliant class. I loved his assignments, and when I wasn't sculpting, I scavenged the campus, interviewing women coaches and minority students for the controversial stories he wanted.

One day Bill presented the ultimate challenge: write an expose. A real one. Right away, Darlene and her former career popped into my head, so at coffee, I asked if I could interview her for my big assignment. Knowing how much this grade meant to me, she agreed to reveal all, but on one condition: I could not disclose her real name.

I agreed. "What did they call you back then? We'll use that."

"Cherry Pie."

What an interview! My reporter's notebook filled with the proceedings at Mustang ranch, the legal brothel east of Reno, where Darlene, a.k.a. "Cherry Pie", once worked. She told of the city fathers and civic leaders who received what she called "freebies" in exchange for favors to Joe Conforte, Mustang's infamous owner. She described the "pimps" who controlled the girls' finances, taking everything they earned from "turning tricks" and doling back a only few dollars, and of the physicians who would diagnose a disease even if there wasn't one, in order to receive payoffs from the girls. Her story was horrible and eye-opening. I discovered a new, unsavory world, and I wrote about it with all my heart and soul.

Professor Bill jumped on my story with a rush of titillated ecstasy. He called it the perfect expose and contacted the AP wire service; they were going to run it in newspapers across the country, with my byline.

Me—famous! And I'd make enough money to pay for the final semester of college! The only thing Bill needed, in order to verify the authenticity of the story, was the name of my source.

I smiled. "Oh, I can't give you that."

Bill rose up to his full stance as newspaper professional and thundered, "Mary Lee, we've got to have that hooker's name! You have a future in this business!" Bill promised to help me

get a job anywhere I wanted. He simply needed the name of this one second-rate whore in order to expose the biggest story to ever come out of Reno, Nevada.

Shaking in my boots at this man who was every bit as important as a general, or maybe God, I quivered. I quavered. Then I slowly shook my head.

“I can’t do that. I gave her my word.”

The argument grew. Bill was determined, and his language and threats escalated. Fortunately, thanks to Darlene, I’d learned some new language as well. There in the hallway, jostled by startled passers-by, I stood face to face with my professor, firing his words back at him in loud, embarrassing tirades, and a part of me stood back and watched myself in shock. How could I be doing this? But I was. I did.

And the story of the Mustang Ranch was never revealed.

I didn’t tell Darlene about the fight. She and I continued having coffee and talking art, but I knew that experience of defending a principle against a god had changed me. I began to question my art professor. I refused to accept his demeaning critiques of my

work and defended it hotly. Surprisingly, he gave me A’s. I began questioning the entire art department, an all male faculty, for expecting a female student majority to conform to their ideas of what art should be. Oh, I was righteous, and it felt so good!

The months raced by, and I was filled once again with the wild spirit of my childhood. A brand new beginning was at hand, and I would go on to a long, successful art career.

One day towards semester’s end, I came to class and found Darlene’s seat empty. I never saw her again. But my good friend, “Cherry Pie”, without knowing it, had held up a window for me to gaze through and re-discover my true self.

I will remember her all the days of my life.

About the author:

Mary Lee Fulkerson makes contemporary baskets and has exhibited nationally. She is author of *Weavers of Tradition and Beauty*, about Native basket makers of the Great Basin, and *A Basket of Blessings*, a perpetual calendar. She is wife to one, mother to three, grandmother to five wonderful folks. Her work can be seen on her website, www.maryleebaskets.com

The Face in The Mirror

by Linda Hoye, Auburn WA

It is morning. Classical music from my clock radio gently guides me to consciousness. The deep and regular breathing of my husband combines with the soft music in a melody that tempts me to linger in our sleigh bed sanctuary. Sleep is an elusive visitor these days and I am reluctant to leave her behind when she visits. Nevertheless I rise, still struggling to surface from the comfort of sleep, and stumble to the bathroom.

I stand before the mirror, nearsighted and without the help of contact lenses or glasses. All I see are blurry shapes, so I lean forward for a better look. As I gaze into the sleepy eyes of the woman in the mirror I whisper “where did you come from?” for I barely recognize the tired face looking back at me. The eyelids that seem to droop more with each passing day remind me of faded crepe paper left over from a party that lasted too long. The whites of her eyes are slightly bloodshot and the skin underneath is dark and puffy. Her skin is blotchy and there is a blemish near her eyebrow. A blemish, for heaven sake, at age fifty! Her lips are thin and tiny wrinkles fan out from them like spikes of the dracaena I planted yesterday. Her hair is short and darker than it was a few years ago.

I fill the sink with warm water and dip my washcloth a few times. Some women say that at a certain point in life they see their mother’s face looking back at them when they look into the mirror. I never knew my own mother and so if she is there I don’t recognize her. In fact, as I look at the face in the mirror I find that she reminds me of another woman I once knew.

I see myself at twenty years of age in the unwrinkled face of a young mother. She is tired from caring for a baby and yet her eyes still sparkle. She wears no makeup, save for black mascara,

and her lips are full and turned up in an expectant smile. Her hair is long and blonde and falls straight over her shoulders. She feels somewhat trapped by the circumstances that have become her life, yet is hopeful that things will change. She is proud of the fact that she is often told that she is good for her husband, but sometimes wonders if he is good for her. “Be strong”, I want to tell her. “Make the hard choices now and you will save yourself from heartache you can’t even imagine”. I know she won’t heed my warning. She thinks she has it all figured out.

I lift the wet cloth to my face and hold it for a few moments.

Breathing slowly and deeply I take comfort in the warmth of the cloth and the sanctuary that it has made for me. Finally I remove it and my eyes open to another face in the mirror.

She is me at thirty and her eyes are clear and strong. The hope that was there at twenty has changed to hunger for a life that somehow seems just out of her grasp. Her hair is shorter now and is cut in a new professional style, for she has just finished college and landed the job of her dreams. She is working full time, raising two children, and coping with a heavy drinking husband. She wishes and prays for him to change but deep down inside she is beginning to lose hope. “It’s not too late”, I want to tell her. “Don’t let go of your dreams.” I can tell that she has heard snippets of my advice and is considering her options.

I take refuge in the warm, wet cloth once again breathing in the moist heat. When I look up, a face similar to the others gazes back at me. This time there is something different in her eyes.

She is forty and her eyes tell the story of pain and hard times that she has come through. She finally mustered the strength to

leave her marriage and subsequently endured years of depression, guilt, stress and hopelessness. Eventually, she emerged wiser and is now on the path to a new life. She has recently remarried and feels like a young woman again. I'm proud of her, because for the first time in her life she did what she wanted and needed to do. Her face is beginning to show signs of her age, but she barely notices. She is enjoying her life.

Then she vanishes and the woman I am today remains. I am fifty and I look haggard in the morning light. It will take some makeup-magic to make me presentable to the world. Yet in the eyes that are beginning to disappear under sagging eyelids, I see a glimpse of the future. I see the bright eyes of my baby granddaughter.

I have no mother to compare my mature self with, but I have a son, daughter and granddaughter who may one day compare

their own aging faces with mine. This thought inspires me to go forward and to follow my dreams. I owe it to the younger women who visited me in the mirror this morning. I owe it to my son and daughter, and I owe it to my granddaughter.

They say she has my eyes.

About the author:

I am an HR Business Analyst living in Washington state with my husband and our two Yorkshire Terriers. Last year, as I began to contemplate my upcoming fiftieth birthday, I thought about hopes and dreams that I had set aside in the past. Now, I have returned to my love of writing and I am working on a memoir. Story Circle Network has encouraged and inspired me to nourish this creative side of myself. For that, I am thankful.

Glowworm

by Linda Sievers, Arcata CA

She changed my life. The day I met her defined the next fifty seven years of my life. By her example I discovered a love for dance that would lead me into my careers as a dance professional and educator, providing me the opportunity to inspire lives as she had illumined mine.

Her name was Laetitia, Latin for joy. We students called her Miss Hoffman.

I was three years old in 1949 when my mother and I walked into her dance studio.

Miss Hoffman's raspy voice greeted me. "Why, hello there. Who is this lovely little glowworm all dressed in yellow? Do you know what glowworms do?"

Peeking from behind my mother I blurted, "They twinkle!"

"They certainly do. If you take my hand, we'll learn to dance and twinkle just like the glowworms."

Thick-boned and large-framed, she weighed nearly three hundred thirty pounds; a most unlikely dance teacher, yet, she was knowledgeable, rhythmic and versatile. Short, black curly hair framed her porcelain-rose face always adorned with a generous smile. Shelton Stroller dresses rippled around her well proportioned, ample figure, as essences of Chantilly wafted with her every move.

Challenging today's diet precautions, Miss Hoffman lived eighty four years on cheeseburgers, French Fries, beer, and chocolate peanut clusters. Laughter was her panacea for longevity. I don't ever recall seeing her sick.

Her apartment beneath the dance studio was profuse with antique furniture and dainty figurines. As we students tapped, flip-flopped, and jumped overhead, "Duchess," her beloved Sealyham terrier, waddled patiently amidst the rattle of delicate china statuettes.

Miss Hoffman had a keen instinct for making every child who came into her studio feel special. I was no exception. When I

reached age twelve she invited me to demonstrate ballet, tap, and jazz material to her younger students. I felt excited and honored to be given this position of responsibility. I could hardly wait for the school dismissal bell to ring at 3:00 P. M. so I could race to the dance studio and envelope myself in a world filled with music and dance.

Through Miss Hoffman's example I learned to work congenially with children and parents. I answered the phone and took messages for other voice and piano teachers in her establishment. At recital time, I learned creative problem solving by constructing simple sets and props. I saw that loving your work meant never becoming burdened by work. Nothing was impossible. People who weighed three hundred thirty pounds could dance beautifully.

After high school, I left home to dance professionally. I performed in musicals and later, was a soloist and corps member in regional ballet and modern dance companies on both the east and west coasts.

Upon my return home, I attended an outstanding dance concert by a younger, more contemporary teacher in town. Having taken professional level classes while touring, I decided that this teacher offered challenges better suited to my career goals to teach young adults, but I was painfully torn between my love for Miss Hoffman, and my need for a professional environment in which to grow.

Laetitia Hoffman had been my teacher since I was a baby. She inspired me to dance. How could I make her understand that I would forever value what she had given to me, but her children's classes could no longer fulfill my needs? How would I feel years from now if I did not take this opportunity to pursue advanced study? Wasn't I supposed to expand the dream she had helped inspire in me by being free to make it my own?

With hesitancy, I broached the subject of my decision to study with the other teacher.

Miss Hoffman's demeanor changed, dramatically. Coldly, she said she understood taking professional level classes while I was touring out-of-town, but, how could I even consider taking classes with her competitor.

My heart stuck in my throat. I answered that it was because of her that I wanted to teach and to inspire others to dance. I did not want to teach children. I wanted to teach in a university. I needed more advanced training.

Miss Hoffman's eyes glared at me. She said her life's work had been with children. Her voice broke when she said she was deeply hurt to think that I no longer valued her expertise. She asked me to leave her studio.

I was devastated.

But, I was determined to pursue my dream to create a successful life based on my love for dance. I spent the next two years studying and performing with her competitor before leaving home permanently to earn two degrees in dance performance and choreography.

Fifteen years passed after that painful parting with Miss Hoffman, with no communication between us. I was teaching dance in a state university, working toward tenure.

During a visit home my mother encouraged me to call Miss Hoffman, who, surprisingly, wanted to see me. I feared our years of separation would strain our visit. I was nervous as mom and I drove across town.

Miss Hoffman opened her door. A soft whispering of Chantilly permeated the summer evening. Her raspy voice welcomed us. She served cold drinks. I could see her knees bothered her as she moved cautiously among her delicate antiques. We reminisced and laughed over shared experiences. She missed Duchess, who had died years ago. She asked if I liked teaching young adults. She offered to sell me her business. I thanked her, but said my life was well established in academia on the west coast. We never mentioned our parting. Soon it was time to leave.

My mother went to the car. Don't weaken, I thought to myself. I turned and held Miss Hoffman's eyes.

Morgan's Legacy

by Michelle Welch, Bakersfield CA

Sitting in the front row of the crowded conference room in Houston, I could only feel pride for my son, Mark, and a deep sense of humility as he stood to address the dignitaries assembled on stage, "Dr Christofanilli, honored guests, friends, and family. Today, with the dedication of the Morgan Welch Inflammatory Breast Cancer Clinic at M. D. Anderson Cancer Center here in Houston, we celebrate the beginning of the end of IBC..." Mark's speech was passionate as he shared of his love for his wife, Morgan, his hatred of the cancer that had stolen her, his dreams and hopes for the IBC Clinic that now would bear her name.

"Thank you for teaching me to love dance. It has illuminated my life."

In the soft evening twilight I followed her gaze as she scanned the Elm trees lining her yard. Then she looked at me and smiled.

"You credit me more than I deserve. I was unfair to you the last time we saw each other. I was hurt that I could not provide the training you needed. But I am honored to have been the first to teach you to love dance, and that you are sharing it now with others."

Ten years later, I received a letter from my mother who wrote that Laetitia had been hospitalized for surgery and was recovering nicely when suddenly, her heart gave out. Included with mom's letter was an obituary clipping. I still have it.

I feel blessed to have had a career doing what I deeply loved. For thirty years I taught in universities where I developed courses and curriculum for a dance major, choreographed student dance concerts, and mentored students into careers.

Repeatedly, students told me that they experienced an unexplainable, transcending, and soul connecting joy in my classes.

Remembering back to the scent of Chantilly and echoes of a raspy voice, to a world filled with music and dance, and a large, graceful woman, who inspired a dream that filled my life, I smile.

I will never forget Laetitia Hoffman, who radiated joy into my being the day she took my hand and turned me into a dancing glowworm.

About the author:

Born in Springfield, Illinois, Linda began dancing at age three studying ballet, tap, jazz, and acrobatics. She pursued her BA in dance at the Universities of Illinois and Maryland and received her MFA from the University of Utah. In 1980 she began teaching young adults ballet, modern dance, choreography, performance, and world dance at Humboldt State University in northern California. She served as chair for the Department of Theatre, Film and Dance before retiring in 2006.

Linda is married to artist Douglas Sievers. They have three daughters and three grandchildren. Writing is a new, challenging, and enjoyable pursuit for Linda.

A bird landed briefly on the windowsill near me. My thoughts wandered to the last day in Morgan's hospital room. Her CD player issued the soft "whooshing" sound of ocean waves in her room, a recording that brought her beloved ocean here to the medical center. The sound of waves and seagulls bringing my 24-year old daughter-in-law closer in heart to the beaches she loved on the Florida Gulf Coast. She lay in bed, listening, clearly annoyed with the bird sounds.

With only two chairs in the private room, the seating was awkward. Mark occupied the chair near Morgan, gently coaxing her to sip a vanilla milkshake. Morgan's Aunt Cindy and her mother, Pam, shared the other chair, a sleeper/recliner. I sat perched on the deep windowsill at the back of the room. Pam's friend, David, paced uncomfortably in and out of the room.

Dr. Christofanelli was a commanding presence as he walked into the room in his white lab coat. Following him were five female clinicians from the breast cancer unit, each wearing a white lab coat with identification tags. Each team member carried a clipboard of papers. Each woman wore a stethoscope hanging from her pocket or at her neck. The medical team focused on their pale patient lying in bed.

"Good morning, good morning," Dr. C. spoke briskly, a soft and friendly familiarity in his voice. He had grown to know his youngest breast cancer patient well. She was his tenacious ally in the battle. "How are you feeling today Morgan?" he inquired gently, bending near her. Morgan's face and limbs were swollen, evidence of her lymph system shutting down. Wisps of inch long, patchy dark hair belied the thick raven locks that once had been her favorite feature. A pink makeup bag nearby was evidence that she had anticipated this visit with the best intention of being well groomed for a call. It was her Southern way.

The hospital bed hissed and buzzed softly beneath her. Morgan opened her tired eyes briefly, a nod to the doctor and a glance at her husband, my son, Mark, her response. She moved her lips slightly upward in a small, brave smile, and the team members smiled back, delighted. She was a fighter, and they knew it well. Mark gazed at her with heartbreaking tenderness.

In the back of the room, I felt I had invaded a deeply private moment. I glanced outside, watching the cars six stories below me driving into the parking garage. I considered that there is all the time in the world, or perhaps no time at all, for some of those people driving by.

Dr. C. sat down on the end of Morgan's bed in a fatherly gesture, "Morgan, Mark, I am so very sorry to tell you this news. Morgan, the metastasis is spread now to both lungs, and the tumors in your brain, there are too many, and we have not been successful in arresting them." Dr. C.'s Italian accent was thickening with emotion as he struggled for composure. "We have fought a very difficult and brave battle. I have no more to offer. I am so very sorry." He paused a moment, letting this news settle on the family in the room. I felt a knot rise in my throat.

Dr. C continued gently, "Your time is likely very short." Do you understand what I am saying, Morgan?"

Mark leaned nearer his wife, wrapping an arm around her as he spoke, "Do you understand, Dr. C., Morgan?"

Morgan opened her eyes, and looked at Mark for a few seconds, studying his face. Then nodding, she leaned into his shoulder as a tear slipped down her cheek. Mark continued, "Do you know

where the cancer is, now honey?" He asked her gently. She responded slowly and deliberately, first nodding her head, and then bringing her hand to her chest and up to her head, tapping each lightly. She knew.

Mark held her long and gently, as if he were caressing a newborn. Then wiping his own tears and taking a deep breath, he turned to Dr. C. "What do we need to do now, sir?" Mark's US Air Force training over the past five years showed in his respect for his senior in command.

"Its time to ask Morgan what she wants to do," Dr. C stated gently. "Morgan, what do you want? Do you want to stay here or go home?"

Morgan pressed back into her pillows, the expression on her face showing deep concentration. I could only imagine her thoughts as she considered MD Anderson Cancer Clinic, which had become home much of the past 18 months. Mark had pushed her wheelchair through these halls on Valentine's Day as they had shared pink M&MS with the staff. They'd made crafts together in the art room to pass time. The highly private prank of sneaking Morgan's little dog into her hospital room for a visit had transpired here. Living in Florida had been such a brief part of their 20-month marriage. But it was still home. "Go home," she whispered.

Mark again leaned in and whispered, "Where is home, honey?"

Morgan focused again, her eyes still closed, and we were all leaning in now to hear her. "Fort Walton Beach." She uttered. "See my ocean... no seagulls." Mark smiled back at her through his tears, understanding her loathing for the birds and her love for the white sand beach of her childhood. "We will go home, babe. I will take you home."

The handsome Italian doctor was smiling now, eyes brimming as he stood at the podium embracing Mark, the two men sharing a moment of remembrance and, and hope and celebration.

Sometimes overcoming means winning at great odds. Sometimes it simply means giving your very best, doing the right thing even though the odds are stacked against you. Morgan and Mark had agreed from day one not to give up on cancer treatment. And they never did. More important, they never gave up on each other. They chose to be over comers of circumstance, and their love grew and flourished despite huge obstacles. Our loss of Morgan, albeit pain filled, birthed great gain and we have all been profoundly changed because of her. I will remember Morgan Welch, and continue the fight against IBC in her name.

About the author:

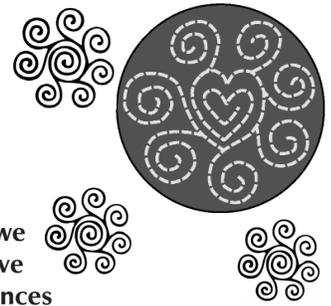
Michelle Welch lives in central California with her husband, Mark, and her little doxie mutt friend, Grace. She has three sons and a daughter and two grandchildren. Michelle enjoys writing as well as dabbling in water color painting, and she also possesses a passion for teaching others about IBC. To learn more, please visit the Erase IBC website, www.eraseibc.com.

Circles: The Heart of Story Circle Network

Start A Circle of Your Own!

by 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.



This month we highlight two of our long-standing story circles: “Sharing Our Stories” with facilitator Judith Helburn, and “Wordswomen” with Susan Myrick. Here is more about these circles from these two wonderful facilitators.

Judith says, “Sharing our Stories was the first writing circle in Austin and has been meeting for 10 years; we still have some original members. We have been meeting at various Austin libraries and aren’t permitted to bring food. However, we do have an annual December meeting at a member’s home which includes eating and sharing and sometimes an exchange of a gently used gift.

“Our format is pretty casual. I bring a couple of written prompts dealing with the same subject, often from childhood, then adult reactions. We do timed writings and share. This year’s members are sharing the responsibility of bringing prompts.

“My circle limit is 10 and we are full with a waiting list. Good friendships have come out of our circle, including a couple of women who have created a comedy routine for public performance. We have been going long enough for one of our members to pass on to a different reality. We miss her, not only because she wrote fascinating stories about her very difficult life in Columbia but because she became a friend. She actually began writing in Spanish and translating and reading.

“I have about 100 pages of writing about myself and my family which I would have never produced without our circle.”

Susan Myrick’s Illinois circle has also been meeting for 10 years. (Is this a magic number?) She says of her circle, “We have limited our size to five and meet once a month from 1 to 3 p.m., rotating residences. We work at dining room tables with snacks in the middle: tea, fruit, cookies or quick breads, nuts, dried fruit, etc, depending upon the hostess’ unique creative style. First I throw out a topic for a 10-15 minute fast write. We read aloud – but don’t follow the usual no comments rule. We respond – picking out phrases we like, asking questions. It’s a very safe environment. Then we read our own work (one to five pages). Everyone has her own projects at this point, although we started out with memoir writing (which produced large notebooks of results). To keep the memoir juices going, I hand out ‘assignments’ at the end, along with some fast-write topics to use during the month. Last year the assignments were related to the

theme of lists. This year it is endings. The assignments encourage people to remember and find new three-dimensional ways to approach their stories. Three of us have been working together for 10 years and the participants keep showing up, so we must be doing something right!”

Examples of recent prompts for this group include: “Writing a Backwards Story Beginning with ‘The last time I...’, “Making Sense of it All: Improving Your Writing Using the Five Senses,” and “A List of Shoes.” I especially like this last one. As we’ve said before in this column, lists make great prompts because they are un-intimidating and put professional and amateur writers on the same level—no worries about grammar or wording or trying to be poetic! And what woman *doesn’t* love shoes, or at least have a story or two about toddling around on her first pair of heels?

If you would like to join a story circle in your area, check our “Story Circles Around the World” listing on the website. You’ll find it under the “What We Do” tab. If there isn’t one near by, consider starting one of your own. Our SCN Guide for Facilitators contains everything you need to begin, including information on finding members, duties of the facilitator and six sessions worth of prompts. The Guide is free to SCN members and just \$3.00 for non-members. (You can place your order from the same Story Circles Around the World page.) Story Circle Network member facilitators may also choose to join our Facilitator’s Yahoo group where they can post questions and give and receive advice on organizing and running a circle. And of course, all SCN affiliated circles (those whose facilitators are SCN members) are invited to post their circle description and contact info on the same website listing.

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 \$8.00 plus shipping and handling, or download for \$5.00.

If you are a SCN facilitator who would like to have your circle featured in our column, or someone with general questions about circles, please contact the Circles Co-Coordinator at circles@storycircle.org.



Take A Bow! Spotighting Our Volunteers *Linda Wisniewski*

by Lisa Shirah-Hiers

A member of SCN since 1999, Linda Wisniewski has participated in an internet and a local story circle, two national conferences, two retreats, the annual Susan Wittig Albert Lifewriting Competition and online classes. A member of the Board of Directors, she served as the first one of the first editors of the revamped SCN Book Review Site. She has recently published a memoir, *Off Kilter: A Woman's Journey to Peace with Scoliosis, Her Mother, and Her Polish Heritage*. The SCJ takes a closer look at this multi-talented member.

As a young girl, Linda always imagined being a writer but had no idea how to go about it. Like all writers, she was an avid book reader too, so she turned that passion into a career, earning a Master's Degree in Library Science from Villanova University. Now she combines both interests, writing for a weekly newspaper, substituting at a library, and teaching memoir writing. She lives in Pennsylvania with her husband, a retired scientist. They have two sons.

Linda's book, *Off Kilter*, takes her battle with scoliosis as a metaphor for the larger struggle for a balanced life. The book began as an essay in *Mindprints Literary Magazine*. When the essay was nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a workshop teacher suggested she expand it, she says, "...I used the essay about scoliosis as a metaphor for my life as the framework to connect [several other pieces].... I wanted to write about creating a life for myself by healing the wounds of emotional abuse.... I hope that the story of my coming to terms with my mother's passivity, my father's cruelty and the suffering taught by my church will make readers think about what, if anything, they put up with in their own lives that is holding them back."

When the editors of WOW (Women on Writing Newsletter) asked Linda to be one of the first to participate in their newest venture—organizing blog tours to help writers promote their books—she jumped at the chance. "For a relatively small fee, they contacted highly trafficked blogs and lined up about a dozen 'dates' for me. The blog owners sent me interview questions or asked me to post a 'guest blog.' Some offered *Off Kilter* as a prize to people who commented on the blog that day."

Linda's blog tour was a success. She was interviewed on 13 different websites in a span of 25 days. She says there are advantages to a "virtual" book tour. "It's nice to interact with readers online who are too far away to visit a book signing in person." Her publisher, Peggy Elam of Pearlsong Press in Nashville, also uses new technologies to promote her authors. "She recently set up book widgets for all of us to use via BookBuzr...[and] created PDF files about me, my book - a complete press kit. [She] creates posters, flyers and postcards for me when I do an in person book talk or signing... I love [emailing] the posters and flyers [she] creates to Staples and picking them up later that

day! Beats turning them out the old way on my office printer. And they look better, too."

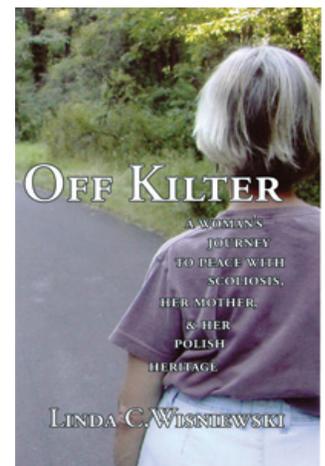
Linda's advice about publishing is not to get discouraged by rejections. "I sent out one query package a week and said I was going to quit after a year (52 packages.) I got lucky at number 13, partly, I think, because I tailored each package to the individual small publishers I was targeting." She advises looking up books similar to yours at a bookstore or library and taking note of their publishers. "Look them up online, find out their submission requirements and follow them." As for utilizing new technologies she says, "Don't be afraid to ask for help. Don't spend time trying to do everything yourself. Spend your precious time writing."

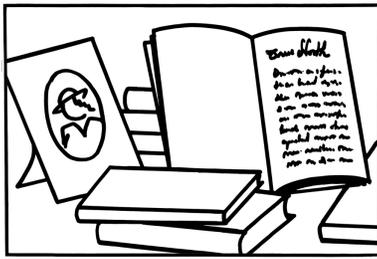
Linda says of her life "...being open and flexible enough to look at possibilities has saved me when I might have fallen into a rut or worse. Divorce, financial worries, serious illness, and rifts with family were opportunities to rethink my plans and enjoy what is rather than regret what 'isn't'. We create our own happiness. Many people, myself included, spend years trying to change the way people treat us. But the key to a joyful life really is within our own hearts, if we take the time to pay attention." A wise woman with many talents, we are grateful Linda Wisniewski chose to share them with us."

To find out more about Linda and her book, visit her website: <http://www.lindawis.com>

"When I'm sewing, I feel as if I'm standing on [my mother's] shoulders, as she stood on the shoulders of women before us who sewed through the ages, making clothes, making art, making memories. And if only by a thread, I finally feel connected to my mother."

~Off Kilter, A Woman's Journey to Peace with Scoliosis, Her Mother, and Her Polish Heritage





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. Visit us at www.storycirclebookreviews.org.

"Just the knowledge that a good book is awaiting one at the end of the day makes that day happier." —Kathleen Norris

Norris' quote is like a personal mantra for me on busy, challenging days. I've also adopted it for use in all of my Story Circle Book Reviews correspondence. Books can magically transport us from the days' problems, worries and stresses as we delve into worlds unknown, characters we've yet to meet and knowledge we've yet to learn. Or, conversely, if we need information to help us solve those daily challenges, we can find that in a book as well. Books for every reason, for every season of our lives...

At SCBR, that is our reason for being—to bring the newest and best of women's literature to our readers. Our editors strive to find the books—we liken ourselves to detectives—and our enthusiastic team of reviewers gives insight into them. Our newsletters remind our readers what is new, and we honor the work of this exceptional group of women who give their time to read the books and then review them.

What's new at SCBR? We have two new editors, Linda Hoye and Judy Miller, both of whom will assist with book procurement and editing of the reviews. You can read their bios at the SCBR Site. (<http://www.storycirclebookreviews.org/>) We're de-

lighted they've joined us and look forward to having even more books to review.

New books, you ask. Of course! *The Girls from Ames* is the story of the enduring lifelong friendships of a group of women—and the very first book we've included by a male author (Jeffrey Zaslow). *The Unruly Woman*, a study of comedic women, including one of my favorites, Miss Piggy. Seriously, this book about women and comedy looks fascinating. Diana Nolan's review of the memoir *We Used to Own the Bronx* won Review of the Month honors for her. We've just posted a review of Terry Tempest Williams' newest offering, *Looking for Beauty in a Broken World*, her take on the world post 9/11.

Space limits keep me from mentioning more, but please visit. Silly, serious, informative, romantic—books aplenty for your consideration. We're wishing you a cool, relaxing spot and a hot new read!

Susan Ideus

Co-Editor

Story Circle Book Reviews

How I Discovered Story Circle Network

by Abby November, Austin, Texas

My sister had died July 4 of ALS. I was experiencing a roller coaster of emotions with no highs in sight. I felt as if the roller coaster was in a free fall with no hills at all. When my friend Sandi told me about OWL (the Older Women's Legacy writing group) and SCN, I was intrigued.

"Sandi, I don't write," I told her. "I can't put sentences together. I'll make a fool of myself. Plus my story is too sad. I should just snap out of it."

Sandi is a persistent and loving friend, though. "Just try it," she said to me. "We'll go together."

In the end, I agreed. I waited in the parking lot ten minutes before the OWL workshop was scheduled to start. I wouldn't get out of the car until I saw Sandi's car, because I couldn't go in alone.

So we went in together. Judith Helburn is a non-judgmental, gentle, and marvelous facilitator. She has encouraged both me and my writing. I am so glad that I joined. It's as if a lightness

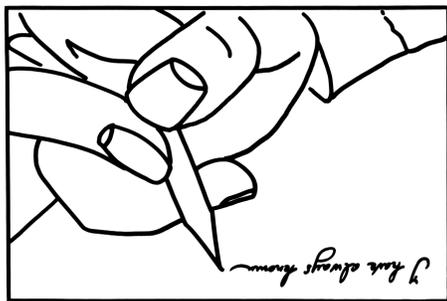
has entered my heart, slowly opening up the empty dark places. I feel warmth and freedom to be.

Thank you SCN, OWL, Judith, and Sandi. What a gift to give a friend: the ability to express oneself and capture the feelings and dreams that flow from your mind onto paper. I hope to write a legacy for my children so that they will know their mother, from whence I came, and how place has helped shape who I have become.

How Did You Discover SCN?

Please share *your* story of how *you* found Story Circle Network, and how it has changed your life. If you can send your writing via email or as a Word attachment, the editors will love you. Send your work to Mary Jo Doig: email maryjo_d@yahoo.com

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



True Words from Real Women

Blessings of a Burden

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 "Blessings of a Burden." Contribute your own True Words to the Journal. Future topics are listed on page 24.

Love is Gentle, Love is Kind

Judy Miller, Austin TX

Our past can be a blessing but it may take a special experience to create that reality in the present. Before I had children I worked as a nurse in a doctor's office. One day I will always remember, because it shaped how I loved my children. Like normal I greeted a patient while we sat down in the examining room.

"Hello Mrs. Jones, how are you and how can I help you?" I said in a friendly, inquisitive voice. She responded with a quick answer, and I said, "And who is this little guy?"

Mrs. Jones brought her grandson, Eddie, with her. She told me she babysat him regularly.

A brown-eyed, curly topped boy was sitting quietly in her lap. I watched as he leaned into her cheek when she whispered something to him. He looked back at me and smiled with a boyish twinkle in his eye. Then he jumped to the floor and hopped to the toy area as if hearing his name was an invitation to play and explore.

"Eddie," said his grandmother, "come close." Little Eddie toddled back and held onto her knee, smiling and watching me.

During the long doctor's visit I gazed at Eddie as he ran his little cars all over the exam table. He was becoming impatient and whiny. Mrs. Jones put her arms around him, which comforted him. Her words were gentle and soft. As the doctor talked, I continued to watch the actions between the two.

Love is gentle and kind. Love is not asking the impossible of a little person. Mrs. Jones was teaching Eddie that the world is a loving place by her actions.

During my lunch break with a friend, I started crying. I hesitantly relived the time with Eddie and Mrs. Jones. I realized that I never had that kind of love. In my childhood years love was painful and fearful.

I remembered that day all of my parenting years and have six loving children. It was agonizing to recall my past but a blessing in disguise.

Every Dog Has His Day

Elaine Thomas, LaGrange TX

"Should we take Cody?"

Although it was the least we could do to honor the memory of my dear mother-in-law, Geri, I was uneasy.

Cody was a tough little dog to warm up to. Fluffy and fat, this distant kin of the Pomeranian breed had an attitude. He barked savagely when we drove up. When we got ready to leave and my husband, Emil, and his mother would hug, Cody wedged himself between them. He was known to guard the door when Geri was in the bathroom—even at home. He had more toys than Target and three winter sweaters. He could also inadvertently cause father-in-law trouble, like the day Pete enjoyed the delicious bowl of giblets and gravy from the fridge only to learn that he had eaten Cody's supper!

Some years before, when Geri was in the hospital, family members had crowded into her small living room. Cody had threaded his way through the relatives to sink down at my feet.

"Cody likes you!" Emil observed.

"Cody doesn't know me," I retorted.

Cody had a new home now, but how he grieved. Subdued and bewildered, he was in a strange place without his beloved Geri. His low, piteous howls tugged at our hearts.

Time soothed his tiny soul, though, and slowly Cody became more animated. From his vantage point in the mudroom, he watched me cook. He loved his food and smelling the aroma of ours. If we made the mistake of leaving the cat food on the kitchen floor at night, he would rush in and gobble it down, remembering nothing about the misdeed the next morning.

Outdoors, he would lie beside our big Catahoula dog and the good companions would survey their rural kingdom. Cody especially relished our days together in my office across the yard. He would sit on the doorstep waiting for me with a look that said, "Where have you been?" When he wasn't around, I would look for him. Cody had become such a joy!

Finally, it hit me. Emil had been right.

Cody picked me long before I picked Cody.

Hidden Blessings

Susan Ideus, Magnolia TX

This was not the way my empty-nest, pre-retirement years were supposed to be: no end to the money woes, the anger and resentment, the depression, the worries, the unfairness of it all, and the shame. Never would I ever have imagined in my worst nightmare that I would have to scrape together money for food, endure the indignity of talking to creditors, or the total humiliation of handing my beloved SUV back over to the finance company. Tensions at home escalated beyond anything we'd experienced in over 40 years of marriage. I didn't want to have to talk to anyone, as I was too busy covering up what was going on.

So I wrote it down. I asked sisters in my writing circle to share how they handled their own dark times, and what a blessing that was. Once I shared aloud, those around me wanted, no, insisted on sharing the load. I went to see my doctor; crippling bouts of anxiety, flare-ups of my fibromyalgia, and sleepless nights beset me. An understanding and compassionate man who let me pour out my woes, he then blessed me with weeks of samples of a new medication.

I found new strength in my faith. In journaling not only my questions but my prayers, I connected to God in a new way. I was comforted on long nights when my only prayers were, "Help" or, "Why?" I remembered my life verse as a young believer: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding...."

It fit, for I've learned to yield, not in the sense of giving up, but rather of letting go. I don't have to be in control or have all the answers. I know I'm where I am supposed to be at this point in my life. I also learned it does not diminish me to ask for or receive help, for that help is an extension of the giver's love.

A support system that is incredible—humbling and empowering—has come from these trials. I have a blessed life.

Discerning Clues

Pat Daly, Largo FL

About eight years ago a colleague asked me if I'd be interested in working with her if a job became available in her agency. I responded immediately with an enthusiastic "Yes!" because I was burned out in the job I held, and her agency offered several benefits I wanted badly. My friend couldn't promise me a job, but she began working to get the position approved in her budget for the following fiscal year.

It took four years for the new position to be approved. I got the job—finally. I was thrilled. There was no down side to this appreciated blessing. And yet, as the past four years have elapsed, I have grown progressively more unhappy in the position. My expectations of job satisfaction were far beyond the reality that has evolved. I am miserable.

I'm "of an age" when the retirement horizon makes me gasp in amazement at its nearness. It seems like yesterday that I was rolling my eyes at the thought of planning for retirement; it was so many decades in the future. I no longer roll my eyes; I look intently at the reflection in the mirror and wonder how I got so old so fast.

I'm tired of working full time. I'm tired of working—period. The burden of my job forced me to analyze what it would take for me to be able to stop working and take a long-deserved break. As in my younger years, I rolled my eyes at the thought. But my heavy feelings of burnout and depression warned me that I had to do something or face wasting precious time that might never be recouped.

Gradually the pieces started to fit together. I was guardedly surprised to see that it might actually be possible for me to stop working and not end up homeless. Joyous thoughts of the many good works I might do with my time sparked in my defeated brain.

I'm leaving my job in nine weeks. The feeling of freedom is inexplicable. A brand new life invites me. I run to the blessing.

She Always Took Care of Me

Connie Stokes, Athens TX

It's early morning. I'm cooking breakfast for the boys before driving them to school. My grandson and I get back to the house, do a little housework, and then drive to my parents.

My mother is very sick. I spend all my days with her. It breaks my heart knowing that these days are some of our last together.

We arrive at their house. My dad is watching *The Price is Right*. My grandson gives him hugs and sugar before running down the hall to my mother's room, where he jumps on her bed and gives her lots of love. She lights up when she sees him.

I greet my mother and love on her before preparing our breakfast. We all sit down to eat; it takes a lot for my mother to eat.

She has a chronic lung disease and a bone disease.

Then I prepare her warm bath. She's so uncomfortable with this because, of course, she's the mother and I'm the daughter. But I convince her to relax and enjoy the warmth of the water. Afterward, I dry her off and rub lotion into her skin.

By now, she is pooped out. I help her into bed. My grandson and I give her more hugs and love before leaving. We will return the following day.

I will always cherish these days, giving back something she'd always given me—love.

A Hair-Raising Story

Sonja Borstner, The Woodlands TX

I was born bald. My mother despaired of my ever owning a full head of hair. As the first granddaughter on both sides of my family, much was expected of me. I never did possess that full head of hair, but by one-year-old, I had a few soft brown locks. My hair grew blonder as I grew bolder.

My fine thin straight hair was not fashionable in the 1950s, so my mother gave me a series of home permanents for that Shirley Temple look. Pin curls, spoolies, and rollers tortured my hair while I slept and tossed and turned.

I envied the hair of my two younger sisters—both blessed with thick hair that tended to curl without help. My ponytail in elementary school was a sad stringy hair affair. I remember a few perms and haircuts in a beauty parlor from time to time and through high school. The rollers continued to annoy my scalp, but by my own choice as a teenager.

I was delighted that straight hair became the rage in the 60s and I let mine grow past my shoulders—still fine and thin and honey blonde. I braided my hair across my head similar to a style my mom concocted when I was young, but this time without the crimped curls hanging down in back.

As I reached mid-life, my favorite hairdresser Valerie called my hair “baby fine,” or, “hair that never grew up.” I don’t wish to be like Peter Pan and never grow up myself. I’m glad I have what I inherited—my Granny Layton hair: fine, the color of dark honey, and, to my younger sisters’ chagrin, with little trace of gray at 62. Now I treasure my few silver streaks of earned wisdom, still alive with the joy of a child.

Nekkid Ears

Kelly McCool, Lockhart TX

My parents divorced when I was two. Even after whole-hearted reunion efforts, the results didn’t take. I remained in my mother’s custody, and this is where the burden came in. Not that I was a burden. Simply put, the burden was single parenting.

I can’t remember which year it was after that, but I was still quite young. While my momma worked, my Aunt Shell and my great grandma—and by great, I mean wonderful—kept me.

Some days, I went to Aunt Shell’s house and played TV game shows with her. She would rip a small piece of foil from the antenna and tape it to the television screen so she wouldn’t see the answers that were revealed to the TV audience. She was so smart.

One winter, my momma left me with grandma every weekday while she worked. I remember running into my grandma’s bedroom early in the morning, jumping into her bed, dashing under the quilt, and snuggling close to her. She’d say, “Nekkid ears! Nekkid ears!”

At least that’s what I thought I heard, though it was actually grandma’s way of telling me to cover myself with the blankets all the way up to my neck and ears—quickly—before I froze to death.

I’m 31 now. Looking back, I recognize that the blessings of these happy memories were clearly tied to the burdens that were my mother’s.

Brava

Dorothy Ross, Davis CA

I knew all the sappy songs of the fifties and most of the Broadway musical tunes of that era, but I missed the Rock ‘n’ Roll era completely. While Berkeley was glowing with peace and love, I was seventy-five miles east, struggling to manage diapers and Pablum for three toddlers. Although I often entertained my kids with show tunes, that was the extent of my musical performance.

But all that has changed. In an effort to protect my voice against the ravages of Parkinson’s, the doctor has recommended that I sing. Shortly after she made that suggestion, I registered at the local community college for a beginning vocal course.

The syllabus was scary. Every student would solo every piece. That meant singing in front of the class, with a live accompanist, each week. That was bad enough, but the final exam would be a public recital. Reading about that prospect in January was pretty daunting, but the concert was five months away, so I decided to shelve my anxiety about it and deal with one week’s assignment at a time.

We started with old standards like *Amazing Grace* and *Brahm’s Lullaby*. Within a few weeks we had graduated to more complex classical pieces. By midterm we were expected to perform the arietta, *Caro Mio Ben*, from memory. Through all this, with the patient coaching of the maestro, my voice had gotten stronger and my range increased by almost a full octave.

The audience for the dreaded final recital consisted of unconditionally loving family and friends, but no one I knew. I wouldn’t even let my husband attend. When I stood up to sing Handel’s aria, *Non lo diro col labbro*, my voice went all shaky and quaky. Rather than stop and begin again, I fought through it and ended pretty well. I even got a few shouts of “Brava” from the college-aged classmates.

I’m already signed up for the next semester. Even if they found a cure for Parkinson’s tomorrow, I would continue with the classes because music has become such an important part of my life.

Tears of Joy

Eileen Kennedy, Missoula MT

Tears of joy! How could that be? I'd just been told of a disease I'd had for years and, although not terminal, there was no cure—so far. Yet that knowledge, that wonderful awful knowledge set me free from a burden carried for over four years and through ten condescending, patronizing, suspicious, often smirking doctors. A few weeks later, the added diagnosis of fibromyalgia as the companion to my chronic fatigue syndrome was met with a comfortable acceptance.

Two as yet incurable invaders—one demanding rest, the other demanding action. How fitting for a Pisces—two fish swimming in opposite directions. How could such a burden be a blessing? Yet for that sweet, fleeting time, it was. I was vindicated.

In the twenty-two years since my diagnosis, the two burdens have been my constant companions. Much of the time, I can keep them submerged (as one naturopathic physician described it.) When they are submerged, I live life to the fullest. Life is to be lived, and there's so much to do in this last quarter.

My energy is my fortune. When I withdraw it, it must be replaced with rest. I'm not always faithful at replacing my energy, though, and sometimes my burdens invade fiercely. Then, I increase my current program of vitamins and herbs, and lie around on the sofa or the bed, letting the Creator know how frustrated and angry I feel at this waste of time.

The exhaustion is the worst. The pain can be excruciating. But the eagerness I feel for all I would like to accomplish in this last quarter of my life and the company of The Constant Companion sustain me through those times.

Since that day in 1992, life has been difficult. Though the blessing of the truth did not, could not restore my health, it did restore my dignity, my self worth, my self-belief. No wonder the tears shed were of joy, not despair. Those would come later, but the blessed tears will always be remembered.

Double Pink

Candace Grams, Lockhart TX

Double pink line. Yep, looks like it. I tell my husband, "Guess what? I'm pregnant."

He says, "That can't be right. Take another test." Seven tests later, we finally agree that I'm pregnant.

We certainly haven't planned this. We already have three. And I'm out on bond. This is not exactly the direction I pictured my life going.

Can we handle my legal battle—and an infant? What will happen in court? What if I go to prison? Who will help with the baby? Will I even know my own child?

She Ain't Heavy, She's My Mother

Andrea Savee, Lakewood CA

Andrea sweetheart, go out and play. I want to talk to your mom.

Dearest Irene, I must say this while your baby girl is still wet-clay ready for shaping by the pressure of your needs and pain.

Change will never be too late for you, but it will be for her. Your daughter's brief childhood is a map drawn by you today. For years, she'll trust it and not herself and end up in blind alleys and maddening cul-de-sacs. She'll wander far from home, making do, searching for an elusive sense of direction. The feeling of being lost will rise in her belly daily as surely as noontime hunger.

I've seen into the future; she finds her way. And from the open road of her life doesn't want me to wave a magic wand and undo you; she loved you and loves you. Free of then and busy with now, she leaves me to my folly, my warning to you, and my wish for her.

What your daughter is not: your therapist, sexual advisor, nurse-maid, comforter, confidante, mature for her age, wise beyond her years, the mother you never had.

What you must do: let her want, need, demand. Be thrilled, not threatened to see her lean and hungry look. Let her try, try, and try again. Then boast, crow, and bask in her glory. Sit in the front row; jump up and down; make a fool of yourself over her. Cheer from the sidelines. Climb up the bleachers. Watch from the wings with roses and dinner reservations. Talk to her about menstruation. Take pictures on prom night. Stay up late together after her first date and her first break up. Make sure she knows she's college material.

What you must find, today: a guide—therapist, spiritual counselor, life coach—someone else to help you take your life into your hands; you hold in them more than just your own.

Now, Irene, go to your watercolor class. (I'm proud of you, by the way.) I want to talk to your mom.

Dearest Anna....

All questions. No answers.

Weeks pass. Early on a Sunday morning, I am overcome by horrible pains. They feel like contractions. But that can't be right. I'm nowhere near my due date.

At the hospital, the doctor confirms that my baby did not make it. I've had a miscarriage.

Suddenly, I'm missing the child I wasn't even sure I wanted in the beginning.

At least I won't be leaving a baby at home without a mother. But to be honest, even today I'm still not sure which event was the blessing and which was the burden.

Our Cross to Bear

Doris Roop Benner, Richardson TX

A parent's life is never truly
their own—
so

They give their children
messages to take
into the future

A future where
the parent cannot go
but needs to be!

Mothering

Nancy Franke, Krum TX

“Grandma is dying. You need to make things right with her.”

My daughter's words stunned me. I knew my 82-year-old mother had been ill for several years with COPD and other ailments, but didn't realize she was on hospice. And I didn't know if I had the desire or stamina to deal with Mother. Our relationship was conflicted and I was wary of her power to wound.

Mother's temper was legendary, and I had often been the target of her rages. I sought counseling and decided that our relationship was too toxic to mend or salvage. For years, even though we lived 30 miles apart, I stayed out of her life and she didn't speak to me.

But now she was old and ill and needed someone. My mother was bent over a walker, tethered 24/7 to a hissing portable oxygen tank.

She had never joined a church, made friends with her neighbors, or been part of a club. She was a recluse, companioned by her elderly dog and cat. Her world had shrunk to the nurses, a hospice volunteer, and the aides who came to her home.

I agreed to share Mother's care with my brother. I sometimes resented it. I put much of my “real” life on hold for nearly two years to help my mother shop, go to the doctor, and deal with a world growing increasingly difficult for her to navigate. I wrote letters, helped look for new doctors, took her to the grocery store when she was well, and shopped for her when she wasn't. To entertain her and to pass the time, I began recording her oral history. She enjoyed this, and I began to understand the child and young woman she had been.

Our relationship was far from perfect, but we slowly grew to trust and respect each other.

I helped admit her to the hospital for the last time, and was with her when she died. We were finally able to say, “I love you.”

In mothering my mother, I began to heal myself.

A Good Heart

Kathy Bishop, Cedar Park TX

I gave him a hug then put my hand on his chest. Yes, his heartbeat was strong.

My husband was a good-hearted man. He was soft-spoken and intelligent. He was a healthy man. He was a very generous man.

My husband. Now I was feeling his heart beating. But it belonged to someone else.

After my husband died, suddenly and unexpectedly, I was given the choice to donate his organs. His heart gave life to another man. Here I was, with my hand on his chest. Meeting him for the first time.

I knew he had a good heart.

Nothing Remains Permanent

Jamuna Advani, San Ramon CA

In February 1961 I was working as a nurse when I met Rup, my future husband. We got married within four months. Our three lovely children were bundles of joy.

We built our first dream house on the plot of land gifted by my father at Imphal, India in 1963. When we moved to Shillong, a beautiful hill town, we built our second dream house. The business prospered. Those were the days we had comfort and luxuries of life traveling almost all over the world.

But the direction of the wind changed unexpectedly. Due to internal conflicts in the department Rup was working for, he encountered problems. His previous work, half the size of the present one, was completed successfully. So he was very confident to complete this new project, and put all the eggs in one basket—all our life's savings including the house we were living. Initially I was not in favor of it but I didn't want to go against his wishes. Consequently we had to sell all our properties to meet the expenses and pay off credits.

Our daughters were married and settled. Our son was contemplating a migration to Canada. So we applied for our immigration, too, as it was possible for him only if parents migrated too; after two years we finally moved to Canada. Just when we were settling down my husband visited India for some work; there he had a stroke and left us forever on February 17th, 1997.

I was drowning in an ocean of uncertain future. At the age of 62, I needed to do something for myself. As I didn't want to do nursing again, I joined Beauty College at Southern California where my second daughter lived. It was good for both of us as I could help her with her twins. I got my certificate from the state board and worked hard as hairstylist till I took retirement.

The fabulous life style I had with my husband was just history. These changes in life taught me that nothing remains permanent.

Dance With Me

Carol Hyde, Round Rock TX

“Nana, Nana, dance with me! Come on, let’s dance!” The tiny hands grip mine, tugging, demanding that I move. She is a dancer, light on her feet, graceful, swirling her skirt to a circle.

“No, sweet pea, just let me watch you. You dance so beautifully.” I reply, drained of any desire to move, much less dance. The hands and voice are incessant and finally I agree, knowing that until I dance, until I’m breathless, I will have no peace.

My granddaughter came to live with me before she was a year old. Her ill mother came too and soon most of the care fell to me. It was not an easy household. By the time she turned three there had been two deaths in our family: my mother-in-law and my husband. My daughter’s health slowly improved.

I tried to be strong, but there were those times I simply could not contain my grief. At times I felt as though my lifeblood had been drained from my body. One such time a small hand gently caressed my face.

“Nana, are you sad?” she asked. Her love and concern washed over me as I replied, “Yes, baby, but I’ll be okay.”

“You miss Pappaw,” she said as we cuddled together.

I am not a dancer, not even remotely graceful, but I had always held my babies in my arms when they were restless, singing and dancing to calm them. It worked very well with my grandchild, who found it also worked for me.

This tiny child, so dependent, led me back to life one song at a time. Pulling and tugging me to the middle of the living room floor for just one more dance. The dancing calmed me, filled me up, pushed out the sadness that spilt over and threatened to drown all else. This little creature forced me to embrace the moment, let the music wash over and through me, allowing joy to once again find its way into my heart

The Best Christmas

Peggy S. Grose, Austin TX

It was Christmas Eve. We were living in Kerrville, Texas. Our two oldest sons were home from college but had driven into Austin the previous day to do some shopping and attend some parties. They had both graduated from Austin High and had kept in touch with their many friends there. As they left, I advised, “Remember, we will be having our main Christmas dinner tomorrow night, so be sure and get back early and, please, drive carefully.”

Now, the weather was ferocious, with wind and freezing rain. It was dark and the boys were late, but I wasn’t especially worried, as our family has a tendency to be a little behind time. My husband, his parents, who were visiting from Minnesota, and the two younger boys were watching the news in the den. As I entered the room, carrying a tray of appetizers, I heard the newscaster say, “There has been a head-on collision in Dripping Springs and two unidentified men are dead.”

I stood frozen. My mother-in-law began to cry. Gathering my wits, I went to the phone and called the State Patrol, pleading, “I know you can’t tell me who these men are, but perhaps you can tell me they aren’t my boys.”

The patrolman had no information. I called the local sheriff, who promised to radio out to Dripping Springs, see what he could find out, and call me back. For forty-five minutes, we waited, dreaming wide-awake nightmares, and still no word. We waited and waited, and waited some more.

Finally, we heard a car pull into the driveway. Then, a whoop and a holler. It was them!

Oh, what a wonderful Christmas we had. But my joy was tempered by the realization that, out there somewhere, was a family or two for whom Christmas would never again be the same.

Grandfather

Priscilla Ambriz, Lockhart TX

Is God even there? Does God really exist?

These were questions running through my mind when my grandpa died on December 21. His death was totally unexpected, almost unreal.

I’d never experienced the death of loved one before. The sadness seemed unbearable. *Why, God? Why couldn’t you wait until I was out of here?* I prayed for a sign.

On Christmas Eve, I was walking with a friend during rec time. There was an old Mexican woman I’d never seen before. She called me over and asked me point-blank if I’d lost anyone recently: a brother, a father, a male figure?

Startled, I said no and walked away. After another lap, my friend convinced me to go back to her.

I told the old woman that I had lied. She said she knew. She told me that she never goes outside because it’s too cold and because she’s too old. But this night, something told her to go outside and pray. As she was praying, a message came to her. She didn’t understand it but knew I would.

She told me: “He loves you very much and is okay.”

She had no idea how much that meant to me.

Losing my grandfather was hard. I miss him terribly. But I have been blessed with an answered prayer and the comfort of knowing that I was heard.

Beasts of Burden and Blessings

Lorine Andresen, Forest Grove OR

I've been a horse lover all my life—well, since the age of three anyway. That's when my grandpa plopped my bottom on one of his workhorses and let me ride around and around the fields as he plowed his furrows. Oh how he loved his horses.

"Ah," he'd say as he sniffed their necks and nuzzled their noses, "there's nothing better than the smell of a good horse." I'd follow along sniffing, nuzzling, petting, and loving too. Horses were our bond and he made certain there was always one in my life, starting with a shaggy, ornery Shetland pony born to challenge me in every way. A teacher of patience.

Since that shaggy little guy, I've had many horses in my life and I've loved them all. I guess that's why I get irritated when friends I've not seen for awhile ask if I still have horses. Dumb question. Just because I'm older than dirt doesn't mean I should give up something I love. So I challenge their question.

"Well," they say, "I mean the work, the grooming, the expenses, and safety issues—you know, the burden of it all."

They think burden, I know blessing.

Horses are great psychiatrists. They cheerfully nicker their morning greeting as I open the barn door. They watch and listen—actually listen—as I clean their stalls and talk about the challenges of my day ahead, problems I face, or regrets of yesterday. Undivided attention. No charge. Come back tomorrow. No need to worry my secrets will be passed on. Horses don't gossip.

Then there is the riding. Oh, the freedom and wonder of riding trails in the wilderness with special horse loving friends and family. They take us where there are no cars honking or phones ringing. A close-up of nature with a healthy dose of solitude.

I think of Grandpa every time I swing into the saddle, sniff necks, nuzzle noses, pitch poop, groom bodies, or pay hay bills.

Thanks Gramps, for this wonderful gift of burden laced with an abundance of blessings.

He's Not a Burden, He's My Blessing

Lee Ambrose, Kingsport TN

"This little guy is very tiny. I don't know if we can get him home to you but we're gonna do everything we can."

He was so small. So fragile. He literally fit in the palm of my hand: head resting on my fingertips, bottom in the cradle of my palm, feet resting just past my wrist. Weeks passed before I saw his face without tubes and tape obscuring all features. Eyes taped shut to protect from the bright bili-lights, mouth pulled and taped to anchor the tube that helped him breathe, and nose hidden under a feeding tube taped in place.

He had hair of spun gold but beyond that, I had no clue what physical features my first grandchild had. I knew that he was a gift from God. Not knowing whether I'd be able to hold this gift for a few hours, a few days, or a lifetime, I didn't want to lose a single opportunity to be with him.

We weathered many long, uncertain weeks together in the NICU. Spending every possible hour at his side, I held him during the weaning from his ventilator, monitors, and tubes. Even though I swore I'd never raise my grandchildren, I soon found that was exactly what was needed.

We spent the first four-and-a-half years more like mother and child than grandparent and grandchild while I raised him. Then, we faced the pain of a court ruling that took him away from me—giving him to the father who abandoned him at birth.

There have been many changes for Caleb and me. The changes aren't over yet. There will be more difficult times ahead. Each will likely feel like another burden too difficult to bear. The blessing of our relationship, our love for one another, and the beautiful memories we create together will sustain us. We are each other's biggest and best blessing.

Not only did that neonatologist get him home to me, he sent him home to thrive and grow into the happy, healthy child he is now. Born on July 27, 2000, Caleb is truly a blessing.

In the Tenth Year of Marriage

Shawn Essed, Taneytown MD

Incessant housework. I enter my bedroom carrying the baby on my hip and draw open the faded curtains. Unusually cool, clear sunshine pours in with the fresh air. I sit the baby on the floor and turn to the unmade bed, a crumpled pile of sheets needing washing. I pick up Mahmoud's stale pillow to change its case. (Sometimes I do that—laundry only the pillowcases to buy time between stripping the beds.) I put the pillow to my nose and I smell him. Mmmmmmm. I bury my face into the creamy cotton.

He's at the bakery now, working. I perch on the edge of the bed and hug his pillow lengthwise to my body. With my eyes closed,

I rest my head where I can smell the skin of his neck. I hear the baby tapping his xylophone at my feet. I hear Spongebob's voice from the tv downstairs, where the big kids are watching.

I feel like kissing Mahmoud's pillow. Smiling at the urge, I give it a peck. I decided against changing anything today. I just fluff the pillows and spread the quilt right on top of stray hairs, and stains from baby's slobber and mother's milk, and the scent of sweat and oils of two people in love.

Story Circle Network's Lifewriter's Group

Real Words Wednesday

by Dani Greer

We've all had a favorite gathering place at least once in our lives. Whether a club, a café, or even a bar, there's something about the camaraderie of like-minded souls that's hard to beat. Our Lifewriters Yahoo!Group has evolved into such a place, with about a hundred SCN members meeting on-line for a planned event, like last month's discussion of *The Shiniest Jewel: A Family Love Story* by Marian Henley, or just daily conversation.

One of our regular topics is the weekend reading thread where we share the latest books we're diving into. There are so many titles, and many you might not know about except by word of mouth. My reading list grows longer with each passing week.

On Mondays we promote our writing services, our blogs, or even another writer. We encourage brazen hussiness at the beginning of each week, so come toot your own horn!

Recently we added a new weekly feature – Real Words Wednesday. Throughout the day, we exchange our favorite quotations from women, past and present.

Susan A. shares this one: *We are simply hungry for good stories, fiction or nonfiction. Story is the umbilical cord between the past, present and future; it keeps things known. Story becomes the conscience of the community, it belongs to everyone. When we think about what it means to be human, it is always answered or explained through story.* ~ Terry Tempest Williams

Susan S. makes this contribution about our acts of gathering wise words: *I have lots of quotations filed in various ways, and have often thought that collectively they represent a kind of picture of myself, another form of journaling, since they're the lines that have meant the most to me out of all the millions of lines I must have read by now. I guess I've been hoarding them like jewels, so it will be good to have the Wednesday Words as a place to share them.*

And Regina adds: *This morning, as I was reading my Faith Journal, I was struck by the power of quotes. Maybe I have been bombarded with so much information that a quote short and sweet pulls it all together for me. Maybe it is a reflection of our sound-bite culture. I agree that the quotes we savor and repeat are a picture of ourselves. Joan Chittister wrote a book [In My Own Words] and she culled from her journal/quotes and then commented on her own spiritual growth. I am delighted and grateful that we have the Wednesday quotes.*

I think we've all quickly embraced Wednesdays and look forward to more quotations to add to our collections. Likely you have some that you love, too – words that guide and comfort or perhaps bring a smile. Why not share them with us? You can join the Yahoo!Group at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/scnlifewriters> and chat with us. Grab a cup of tea and join in any day of the week, or if you're like me, every day of the week.



More Conference Tidbits

Seeking Donations for Prizes, Gifts, and Auction

Friday Pre-Conference Workshop

To engage a reader's heart, you must write with heart. You need emotion, sensory detail, energy and more. Learn how you can write with heart from two talented and experienced memoir teachers, Matilda Butler and Kendra Bonnett, co-authors of *Rosie's Daughters: The "First Woman To" Generation Tells Its Story*. Join us for our Friday pre-conference workshop, **Writing with Heart: Five Easy Steps to Writing with Emotion, Energy and Color.**

<http://www.storycircle.org/Conference/keynote.shtml>

We are looking for donations for our upcoming women's memoir conference. We need items for our **Silent Auction**, for **door prizes** that will be given during the luncheons, and for the **gift bags** that every two-day attendee will receive.

Gift Bag Donations. We welcome items appropriate for the use of women with a special interest in writing and documenting personal and family stories.

Silent Auction, Door Prize Donations. We're looking for unique, interesting, and artful items that demonstrate the artist's creativity and help us raise money for SCN.

Some examples of the donations we are looking for: paintings, handcrafted

stationery, jewelry, hand knitted items, fabric art, etc. Also welcome would be copies of your latest published book and gift certificates for services such as workshops, massage, editing. This is a good opportunity to showcase your talent and help the Story Circle Network continue to encourage and inspire women with stories to tell.

We will display your photos and info about your donation on our Silent Auction page at: www.storycircle.org/Conference/silentauction.shtml.

I look forward to hearing from you!

Please email me at:

confdonation@storycircle.org.

Judy Whelley



A Conversation With *Heather Summerhayes Cariou*

by Susan Wittig Albert

Heather Summerhayes Cariou was born and raised in Ontario, trained at the National Ballet School of Canada, and was a founding member of the Ontario Youtheatre and the Center for Actor's Study in Toronto. She enjoyed a professional acting career for twenty years across Canada and off-Broadway. She now lives on the Hudson River in New Jersey with a view of New York City and is working on a novel and co-producing the feature film "Make Believe" with her husband, stage and screen actor Len Cariou. She is a member of the Story Circle Network.

Your sister died in 1980, and your memoir was published in 2007. When did you begin to write?

I first began to write in 1983, the summer I moved to New York City from Canada, to be with my love, Len Cariou. I had left behind my country, my family, my friends, and my career, for a time, to explore deepening this new relationship. I told Len the story of my sister asking me on her deathbed to "tell our story." She had said, with her typical use of both humor and pathos, that though she didn't think I was a bad actress, she felt my calling was as a writer. She said I wouldn't meet the people I needed to meet to become the person I needed to become if I didn't write. So, Len and I are sitting in this bistro in Chelsea, and he took my hands in his, and told me I MUST write this story. Though we had no idea where our relationship might take us, he promised me solemnly that he would support me in every way possible while I undertook this. We laugh now about the fact that he didn't know it would take me twenty years.

The writing itself clearly took enormous courage. What aspect of it was most difficult?

I relived everything entirely. Science tells us that when we remember, the body can't distinguish the difference between the real incident and the memory. That's why it hurts to remember. The memory is in the body, so we go through the same pain as if we were experiencing it for the first time. There were many, many, many days when I sat down to write, and then just lay on the floor wailing and crying, and then got back up and finished the paragraph. But I couldn't not do it. I had promised. And I thought if my sister Pam had found the courage to live her life, I could find the courage to write about it. She was always with me in spirit as I wrote, telling me I could do it, believing in me when I didn't believe in myself. So was Len. So were my best friends, and the women of the International Women's Writing Guild. The courage wasn't mine alone. It came as a gift of love from a lot of other people, and I didn't want to let them down. Oh, and the other thing that was difficult was learning to write metaphor. I knocked at that door for a long, long time.

Has the publication of this very personal memoir changed your life (public life, private life) in any way?

Unquestionably. I have found my calling, as my sister predicted. I feel validated, not just by the warm response from readers and

critics, but because I DID IT! I stuck with it the whole way, and I validated myself by doing so. I am proud of myself for what I produced, and I know that I can grow to be an even better writer than I am now. I'm so excited by the prospect. And I absolutely love making personal appearances, being out in front of an audience, talking about the writing process, and what I learned from my life and from Pam that might help and inspire others not to give up. So I feel I didn't waste those years when I was an actress, because it's all coming together now in a way that feels authentic. I have a sense of true self-worth, perhaps for the first time in my life, at the age of 55.

When your sister was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis, you write, "It was as if my family had crossed the waters to a foreign land. We became immigrants in our own lives, leaving behind our identities and relationships as we had known them." That's a powerful description. What do you mean by it?

A diagnosis of catastrophic illness changes everything. It's a thick line drawn down through your life, separating the before and the after. After, your dreams and goals are altered, or the path toward them may become more rugged. The course you take throughout life, the way you make choices, your strengths and vulnerabilities, are all informed by the illness. Not necessarily defined by it, but definitely informed by it. And often your past choices, and your relationships as they are, become crystal clear. You see everything in a new light. You get different ideas about what's really important. And you find out very quickly who is going to peel away and who is going to stay with you for the long haul; who's going to stand up and who's going to crumble. Even what aspects of yourself you can count on, and which you can't, it's all new, almost foreign.

Throughout your girlhood and teen years, your relationship with your mother was profoundly troubled. "She had no idea how much I needed to be held," you say at one point in your book. Yet your mother urged you to "tell the truth" in your book. In what ways did the writing itself change your relationship?

My mother is my hero. She is so completely, beautifully human. She feels every feeling completely. She embodies both the practical and the spiritual and knows when the time has come to be one or the other. I have learned so much about her from writing about her. That's how I discovered her as a human being. We all

tend to mythologize our lives. In writing *Sixtyfive Roses*, I attempted to get past the myth, and in doing so, I found out things about my parents I hadn't known before, that had been hidden from me by my own false assumptions and flawed perceptions.

Mom and Dad both read sections of various manuscripts. Understand, over twenty years there were *many* drafts. At first they tended to take the writing as an indictment of their parenting, and they were quite upset. The book caused them a lot of painful soul searching. But they were always open to discussion, and I am so blessed and grateful for this, because now I don't think there is anything important that isn't out in the open between us. And we got a chance to work on forgiveness, of our selves and each other. When I gave them what I thought would be the final draft, my mother told me it was wonderful, but that they felt I was holding something back out of fear of hurting them. She told me then I had to stand in my own truth, whatever it was, and that she and Dad would find a way to deal with it. She told me to go back and write it again. It took two more years, but it was worth it. They do feel a bit exposed with the publication of the book, but they are intensely proud and supportive. I'm very close to my Mom now. We talk several times a week. Recently, she shared with me that when she hears the song "For Good," from *Wicked*, she thinks of me. I suggest you all download the song and listen! I've got it on my ipod now, and I cry every time I hear it, and think of my Mom.

You write that you learned "to relinquish the right to own my own physical pain, and suffered the death of my ability to voice it." Can you say a little more about that? To what extent has writing this book given you back your pain, and your voice?

When you are a caregiver for a person with a painful illness, your own physical pain gets sublimated; it appears less important by comparison. Over a long period of time, this can become incorporated into one's behavior. I was shocked out of this when I finally went to see an osteopath about a knee that had been in pain and swollen for over six months. He was incredulous that I had lived with this condition for so long without seeking attention. I told him my history, and he said, "Don't you know you have the right to own your own pain?" I burst into tears. This was the first time I had been validated in that way, and it was a turning point. I had always been quite vocal about emotional and psychological pain, yet stoic about physical pain. I still have a very high physical pain threshold, so I don't think writing the books has "given me back my pain," as it were, but I have become better at acknowledging pain and seeking help when I experience it. I value myself more, so I give my pain its due. I guess the book has done that for me, in a way.

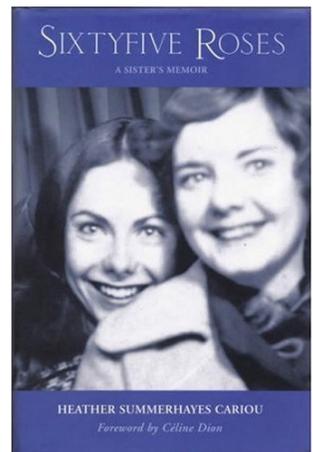
"Memory has a voice, a vocabulary, its own reflective narrative," you write. "Epiphany may occur in crisis, but reflection cannot. The reflective voice is useless in the face of calamity." Given this fact (and I do agree with it), how do we deal with the difficult challenges life hands us? Do we all have to wait twenty years, and then write a book?

Pam used to tell me when I was in crisis to go somewhere quiet and listen to my heart. That was good advice. I deal with the difficult challenges in my life now by remembering Pam's legacy: that you can't control life by being afraid of it; that the only true power we have is our power to choose our response to our circumstances; that we must understand the difference between surrender and giving up; and that though there are times when people or dreams must be surrendered, we must never give up. Also, that joy is there for the taking, if care to look for it, even in the midst of sorrow. I also have a card posted on my wall that says "Serenity is not freedom from the storm; it is peace within the storm." Usually, all we have in crisis is the ability to put one foot in front of the other. Meditation, yoga, a long walk, a good cry and a cup of tea, all of these things can put us in a state of reflection however briefly. But the kind of reflection I'm talking about does take time, and distance.

Now that you've written the story of your life with Pam, what stories of your own will you write?

I am working on a novel about family betrayal, based on the end of my first marriage, and my uncle's successful attempts to estrange my grandmother from my mother. As my teacher Eunice Scarfe as taught me, I will begin with the truth and then enter the lie. There's a kind of poetic justice in that, now that I think of it.

Thank you so much for showing us something of the difficult process that was involved in writing this book and for sharing your feelings about it with us. And we'll look forward to reading that novel!



I live where the river meets the sea.

I live where the waters of the Hudson end their cold journey to the Atlantic. My windows open to the East, the direction Native Americans believe one must face to ask blessings for a new beginning. The morning sun glances off the water strongly enough to blind you. Late afternoon turns the entire West side of Manhattan to flame. At night the rising moon hangs above the jeweled horizon like the Eye of God. The river flows by me, and flows through me. Memory flows through me.

I live where the river meets the sea, where push comes to shove, where love and anguish, blame and forgiveness, laughter and sorrow converge on the way to understanding.

*~Sixty Five Roses,
A Sister's Memoir*





Kitchen Table Stories

First Foray off the Farm

by Elaine Thomas

You have kitchen table stories, too, and we'd love to print them (800 words maximum, please, including recipe). Send by e-mail or as a Word attachment to ppando@gmail.com. In the subject line please type **Kitchen Table Stories**. If you can't send by e-mail, please type or write your story legibly and mail to Patricia Pando, 1423 West Alabama, Houston, TX 77006.

In September days grow shorter and memories turn to other Septembers and back-to-school days. Elaine Thomas shares her adventure into a world away from home and plans to keep the story going by sending this piece to PHEME and Bob's son.

It came as quite a blow to Daddy when I announced I was absolutely, positively, definitely certain that I was not going to be a nurse. Instead, after I graduated from high school, I wanted to study Journalism Administration at SAIT Polytechnic in Calgary.

After I was accepted in the program, I began anticipating the fall semester starting in a few short weeks. Meanwhile, Daddy started grumbling about where I would live. Most country girls moving to the city shared an apartment with friends or, if they could afford it, found a place of their own. But Daddy voiced objections to both options. The cost of living alone made that out of the question and, he believed, roommates might lead me astray. (Perhaps I might lead them astray I thought to myself, but I never dared voice that comment.)

One morning, Daddy put his foot down, informing me that I must find somewhere suitable to "board" or I couldn't go. Even in 1974, the practice of students purchasing lodging and meals in a private home was outdated but there was no room for negotiation.

Mother was beside herself. How was she to locate a place for me to live that Daddy would accept? It may have been my guardian angel who whispered a suggestion to her. Mother picked up the phone and called a lady whom Daddy had known since they were toddlers. Their families had been neighbors for decades and always great friends. Certainly a person this lady recommended would be above reproach, Mother thought.

"Do you know of anyone who would take a SAIT student, our younger daughter, this fall?" she asked PHEME Slater. "I don't think she will be any trouble and she will be coming home on the weekends."

PHEME readily agreed to get involved in the quest to find me a suitable roost. She told Mother to give her a couple of days but in 10 minutes, she called back.

"Would Elaine like to live with Bob and me?" she offered. "We have an empty bedroom now both the boys are gone. Of course, we live quite a distance from the campus but the city bus stops just three houses away. She could transfer in front of Eaton's Department Store downtown to a bus that goes up 10 Street N.W."

It was an answer to our prayers. Mother grinned like a Cheshire cat but tried to wipe the relief off her face when she told Daddy the good news. What could he say? I was going to live with PHEME and her husband in East Calgary while I attended SAIT!

Before I officially moved into the back bedroom, PHEME invited me to lunch. It was the first of many lovely visits we shared in her cozy kitchen nook. When it came time for dessert, she cut me a slice of a spicy, moist treat crowned with a decadent icing bursting with flavor. It was called Tomato Soup Cake.

"This is wonderful," I said, remembering not to speak with my mouth full. "I don't think I'll ever get tired of it."

And I didn't. PHEME made my lunch every school day for two years and more often than not, a slice of Tomato Soup Cake was tucked in the paper bag.

To this day, one bite of Tomato Soup Cake smothered in rich butterscotch icing transports me back to a very pleasant period of my life. In my mind's eye, I'm once again in East Calgary with PHEME and Bob Slater, who became like a second family to me. Yes, thanks to Daddy's guidance, my first foray off the farm turned out to be a great success.

Tomato Soup Cake

2 tablespoons butter	1 teaspoon baking powder
1 cup sugar	1 can tomato soup
1 1/2 cups flour	1 teaspoon soda
1 teaspoon cloves	1/2 cup raisins
1/4 teaspoon nutmeg	1/2 cup nuts
2 teaspoons cinnamon	

Cream butter and sugar. In another bowl, combine flour, cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon and baking powder. Combine, stirring in tomato soup, soda, raisins and nuts. Pour batter in a greased 9x9-inch pan and bake in a preheated 350 degree oven for 30 minutes.

Continued on page 23

Never Fail Icing

- 1/4 cup butter
- 1/2cup brown sugar
- 3/4 cup icing sugar
- 2 tablespoons milk

Boil brown sugar and butter together for two minutes. Add milk and bring back to a boil. Remove from stove, cool slightly, add icing sugar and beat until thick and dull glossy in color.

A new Story Circle Network member, Elaine Thomas writes from the hills south of La Grange, Texas where she and her husband, Emil, live. She has never forgotten her Canadian roots and especially the people who shaped her young life. Over the last 35 years, though, she has calculated just how many calories are in a slice of TomatoSoup Cake!



Registration Form

Send this form with your check to:
 Conference Registration, Story Circle Network
 PO Box 500127, Austin TX 78750.
 To register online and use your credit card, go to
www.storycircle.org/Conference/frmregister.php

Name _____

Street Address _____

City, State, Zip _____

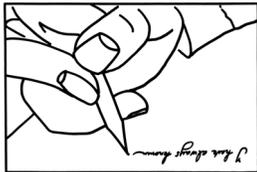
Email _____

Phone _____ Current Member of Story Circle? yes no

Registration Type		Early Registration (Through 12/15/09) Member/Non-Member	Regular Registration (12/16/09-1/31/10) Member/Non-Member	Registration at Door (cash/check only) Member/Non-Member	Amount Due
Full Registration (Friday night Keynote/Saturday/Sunday)		\$200 / \$250	\$225 / \$275	\$250 / \$300	\$
Partial Registration (Please check all that apply)	<input type="checkbox"/> Friday (Keynote/dessert/ reception)	\$30	\$35	\$40	\$
	<input type="checkbox"/> Saturday only (includes lunch)	\$95 / \$115	\$115 / \$135	\$135/ \$155	\$
	<input type="checkbox"/> Saturday lunch only	\$30	\$40	**	\$
	<input type="checkbox"/> Sunday only (includes lunch)	\$75 / \$100	\$100 / \$125	\$125 / \$150	\$
	<input type="checkbox"/> Sunday lunch only	\$30	\$40	**	\$
Friday Pre-Conference Workshop (Not included in full registration; option; extra charge)		\$30	\$35	\$40	\$
Saturday/Sunday lunch preference:		<input type="checkbox"/> Chicken	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian	Total Due	\$

* Non-Members who choose to join prior to the end of the conference on Sunday, February 7, 2010 will have a portion of their registration fee applied to their dues.
 ** You MUST register for lunches by Jan. 31! Registrations for these events will NOT be accepted at the door.

* Scholarship applicants may extend Early Registration to January 1, 2010 by which time they will have been notified.
 Refund Policy: Cancellations are accepted until January 1, 2010, and are subject to a cancellation fee of \$50 for a full conference registration or \$25 for a one-day registration. There is no refund for Friday's lecture/reception.



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:

December 2009 (due October 15)—*Simplicity*
March 2010 (due January 15)—*Dancing With Life*
June 2010 (due April 15)—*Home*

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.

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

Mark Your Calendar SCN Events & Deadlines

September 14: Fall Online Classes Begin.
www.storycircleonlineclasses.org.

October 2-4: LifeWriting Retreat With Robin Edgar. Limited spaces available. Visit www.robinedgar.com for details.

October 12: Fall Mini-Classes Begin.
www.storycircleonlineclasses.org

Nov 2: Be Our Guest! See page 3.

January 11: Winter Online Classes Begin. Classes posted in November at: www.storycircleonlineclasses.org

True Words deadlines are in the article to the left, on this page.

A complete list of writers' workshops, conferences, and classes can be found at: www.storycircle.org/Writers.php



Stories from the Heart V
February 5-7, 2010
Details on pages 1, 3, 19, 23

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