

# STORY CIRCLE JOURNAL

Vol. 14 No. 4, December 2010

The newsletter for women with stories to tell...

## SCN Announces New Memoir Prize

### Board approves The May Sarton Prize for Women's Memoir



May Sarton, 1912-1995

At its October meeting, the SCN board approved the creation of a planning committee to develop procedures for a new prize for women's book-length memoir, to be offered for the first time in 2011. The prize was suggested by SCN's five presidents emeritae: Susan Albert, Penny Appleby, Joyce Boatright, Judith Helburn, and Patricia Pando.

*The May Sarton Prize recognizes the significance, breadth, and scope of women's memoirs. It will be awarded annually and the winners recognized biannually at Stories From the Heart, SCN's national women's memoir conference. To be eligible for the 2012 prize, a memoir written by a woman must have been published for the first time in North America during 2011. Authors do not have to be SCN members in order to be eligible.*

The prize is named in honor of May Sarton (1912-1995), a distinguished American poet, novelist, and author of twelve memoirs and journals. Readers have found her memoirs and journals to be inspiring, moving, and thought-provoking. She explores such universally significant themes as friendship, love, and nature; feminism and sexuality; the search for fulfilling work and the need for recognition; illness and aging; and the desire for a harmonious, peaceful life. "She examines her thinking in the open, so that one can see what a writer is, what is being accomplished, why, how. This artist reveals herself fully, and outlines the spirit of the times as well," biographer George Bailin has written.

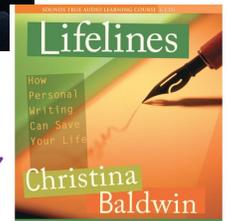
"We're very excited by this new prize," says Susan Albert, SCN's founder and first president. "The committee that worked with the idea hopes that SCN authors will consider submitting their work, and that other members will want to be involved in the judging, publicity, and other aspects of the project."

Lisa Shirah-Hiers, SCN's current president, believes that the Sarton Prize is a perfect complement to the organization's many activities. "Since its founding," she says, "SCN has been dedicated to not only helping women tell their stories but also to raising public awareness of the importance of women's personal histories. With the May Sarton Prize we are taking yet another step, which will not only honor the winners of the award but will benefit our organization as well. The May Sarton Prize will raise awareness of SCN in the world of books and book publishing. This visibility will help us continue to fulfill our mission and to grow as an organization."

Currently, an eight-member committee is at work on developing the prize procedures and policies: Susan Albert, Penny Appleby, Susan Ideus, Judy Miller, Peggy Moody, Patricia Pando, Marlene Samuels, and Judy Whelley. The group will report its progress to the Board at its January meeting, so that work on the 2011 prize can get underway as quickly as possible. Watch the website, national e-letter and other mailings for news about this important new addition to SCN's activities.

## 2011 LifeWriting Retreat

Make plans now to attend SCN's LifeWriting Retreat with Christina Baldwin at Festival Hill, March 4-6, 2011. See the article on page 23.



The retreat is filling fast and space is limited, so don't delay!

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

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 Click on the picture above to link to it!

## Letter From SCN's President— "It Takes Courage"



As we approach the end of 2010 I can't help thinking back on all the ways I've watched SCN grow and the ways I've grown as well since 2000 when I first joined and began writing in e-circle 10. My journey as a published writer began with those monthly prompts. As I gained confidence in my nurturing e-circle I grew bolder. A book review was accepted by the SCN book review editor, a piece I wrote for the Lifewriting Contest took fourth place. Eventually I gained the courage to submit my first articles to editors for real money. It wasn't enough even to pay for my ink cartridges, but it felt wonderful to see my byline and get those checks in the mail. Eventually I would become a contributing editor to the SCJ and have a piece published in *What Wildness is This: Women Write about the Southwest*, facilitate an e-circle, present writing workshops at WFL and Stories from the Heart Conferences and join the board of directors.

In the last ten years I've watched e-circle and board members come and go, witnessed the launch of our book review site and the overhaul of our main site, and watched our membership and our web presence grow as we added new programs and member services, seeking in every way to help women tell their tales. I've enjoyed nurturing other women and watching them grow in some of the same ways that I have. And I've noticed that this growth, whether in an individual or in our organization, requires courage.

It takes courage to write your first piece for an e-circle, or to walk into a room full of strangers for your first writing circle or conference or retreat. It takes courage to read your piece out loud, or to post it to your e-circle. It takes courage to send something in to True Words or the Lifewriting Contest. It takes movement away from what's comfortable into the unknown. Why is it so hard?

I think for most of us the answer lies in our early experiences as girls and young women, writers and creators of all kinds. Not one of the women I've known has made it through grade school, middle and high school, college and graduate school without at least one experience of being discounted, discouraged and belittled. The tragic thing is that many women continue to replay those "old tapes," expecting perfection from the beginning, settling for lives that are so much less fulfilling than they could be.

As a graduate student in an almost entirely male music composition department I was continually frustrated by my lessons. I would trudge in with my sketches for a wind quintet or piano piece only to have them firmly squashed. "Where are you going with this?" "Which fingering do you want for that

note?" "This harmony doesn't make sense." Or even "this isn't music!"

That's the same experience people sometimes go through when they first begin to share their writing with others. "You misspelled such and such . . . You have a dangling something or other . . . You should use a semicolon here . . . This piece has no structure." What if that's what we told little children who are first trying to walk? What if we harangued them with "No, no, no! Put your foot a little more to this side. . . What kind of step is that? . . . You've been at this for weeks now. When are you going to get it?" Whether you are a beginner putting words on the page for the first time since the eighth grade or an experienced writer taking on something different or more personal than anything you've written before, you deserve a round of applause for trying, for having the courage to do something new. When you put your piece in front of someone for the first time, that someone should be as encouraging as a good mother, applauding your efforts no matter how wobbly. What a difference it would have made if my composition professors had said, "What an interesting idea! I wonder where you will take this?" Or "Keep going. You've got a good start."

Courage is important. But there's something just as crucial, something that has to happen first, and that's belief in yourself. You must believe that what you have to say is important—if only to yourself. You deserve the time to write your stories. You deserve a good listener and helpful feedback and encouragement—not criticism—for beginning efforts. That encouragement is not only possible in SCN, it's our foundation and reason for being here!

It is true, of course, that to polish something you need a helpful editor and a dose of appropriate humility and willingness to change what doesn't work. But if the inner critic gets her say too soon, that beautiful fledgling piece will spontaneously abort. It needs time and room to grow. And let's face it; life isn't much fun when the critic's in charge. Letting ourselves be imperfect can be scary. That's why it takes courage. That's why it takes "en-couragement". That's why SCN is such a powerful force in the lives of women. It's nothing less than a cocoon, the safe place where our stories grow wings so they can fly.

~Lisa Shirah-Hiers



## Story Circle Journal

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

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We welcome your letters, queries, and suggestions.

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 PO Box 500127,  
 Austin TX 78750-0127  
 ISSN: 1093-7528

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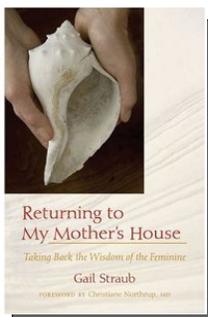
**Back Issues:** Back issues are available either as first-run or photocopies. 1-9 issues: \$5 each; 10 or more, \$3 each. Add postage as follows: \$1.25 for 1 issue, \$5 for 2-5 issues, \$7.50 for 6+ issues.

**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.

## Looking Ahead to Stories From the Heart VI

The SCN Board of Directors is delighted to announce that Gail Straub and Susan J. Tweit have accepted its invitation to give the Friday night keynote and the Sunday afternoon lunch talk at our next national women's memoir conference, to be held in Austin TX April 13-15, 2012.



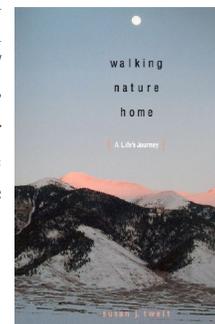
Gail Straub is the author of the highly acclaimed memoir, *Returning to My Mother's House: Taking Back the Wisdom of the Feminine*, which won the 2009 Nautilus Silver Award and was a finalist in ForeWord's Book of the Year Award. Considered a pioneer in the field of empowerment, Gail Straub cofounded Empowerment Training Programs in 1981. Since then she has offered training to thousands of people throughout America, Europe, Russia, China, and East Asia. She co-directs the Empowerment Institute Certification Program, a school for transformative leadership. With her husband David Gershon, she coauthored the best seller, *Empowerment: The Art of Creating Your Life As You Want It*. The book has been translated into five languages and is used worldwide as the basis for empowerment life coaching and support groups. Her website:

<http://www.returningtomymothershouse.com/index.html>.



Susan J. Tweit is the author of twelve books that explore what Aldo Leopold called the "community of the land." Her work has appeared in magazines and newspapers from *Audubon* and *Popular Mechanics* to *High Country News* and the *Los Angeles Times*, and has been heard on the Martha Stewart Living Radio Network. She has taught workshops at colleges, universities, and writing festivals, and was a featured contributor to SCN's anthology *What Wildness Is This* and a speaker at SCN's 2007 book-launch conference, "A Land Full of Stories." She coaches writers, reviews books and interviews authors for StoryCircleBookReviews.org, and contributes frequently to "The Perch," the blog of Audubon magazine, and SCN's "HerStories," as well as her own blog, WalkingNatureHome (<http://susanjtweit.typepad.com/walkingnaturehome/>). *Walking Nature Home* is also the title of her recent (2009) memoir, which Roger Swain, host of "The Victory Garden," called "the best book I've read this year." The audiobook edition, read by Susan, will be available soon. For more:

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



## Story Circle Network's Mission

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



## Join Us On A New Blog Project: *One Woman's Day*

Today a woman somewhere is laughing, weeping, grieving, or celebrating. Someone is giving birth; someone is losing a loved one to death. Relationships are forming, others are ending. For some this will be an ordinary day filled with many of the same activities as yesterday. For others, something unexpected will suddenly make this day unforgettable, one that they may tell their children and grandchildren about in the future. In the same way that we are curious about how our grandmothers lived, future generations will be interested in learning about what an ordinary day was like in our lives.

We are excited about a brand new lifewriting blog project for 2011 and want all of you to be part of it! Starting in January 2011 we will publish a minimum of one post per week with stories connected to that week on a new blog called One Woman's Day. At the end of the year we will have a diverse mosaic of women's experiences written by some of the best lifewriters there are - SCN members!

Think of a day in your life that you would like to write about. It may be something that happened on a specific date or something that reflects a certain holiday or season. Then, submit your story on our blog submission page at:

<http://www.storycircle.org/members/frmblogpost.php>

If you have more than one day you want to write about - all the better!

We are accepting submissions now and will continue to accept throughout 2011. Please join with us in being a part of One Woman's Day!



Visit the Story Circle Network Blog

**Telling Herstories:**

***The Broad View***

***And Now...One Woman's Day***

<http://storycirlenetwork.wordpress.com/>

## Our Volunteers Keep Us Going!

SCN is grateful to our many volunteers, who have contributed over 2,319 hours this year! Thank You!

Volunteers do all kinds of tasks to keep our organization running smoothly. From moderating blogs, to serving on committees or on the SCN Board, to helping with events. If you can give the gift of your time and talent, chances are we have a place for you. Contact Lisa Shirah-Hiers at [lshirah@hotmail.com](mailto:lshirah@hotmail.com)

### Thank You Rhonda Esakov!

Rhonda Esakov has agreed to serve as SCN's new Treasurer. Rhonda is a member of the finance committee and active volunteer in a number of organizations for which she has provided research, training and tax support.

Rhonda joined the Story Circle Network over three years ago, after attending a Be Our Guest. A member of e-circle #8, she found a great support forum to help improve writing and listening skills. She says, "I was working on my memoir and decided I needed a little help, I fell in love with the Story Circle Network organization." Growing up, half in the Middle East and half in the Ozark hills, she says she is a "Type A" personality — detail oriented, well traveled, well read and outspoken. She participates in a significant amount of outdoor activities and is interested in many craft-related skills.

In addition to participating in e-circle#8, Rhonda reviews books for the Story Circle Network Book Review page and has submitted pieces for the Story Circle Network Anthologies and Journal. She was also a presenter at 2008 the Story Circle Network conference, Stories from the Heart IV.

One of Rhonda's goals during her term on the Story Circle Network board is to help to keep the organization from getting stale. "New blood helps improve or maintain the foundations and ideas behind any great group and allows others to not shoulder the entire burden. I hope to bring a willingness and ability to pitch in where help is needed. I am versatile with the ability to lead, follow or get out of the way. No, maybe make that 'clear the way'."



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on the link to Create A Gift  
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September - November, 2010

## Members In Print & In The News

SCN members make the news by publishing books, articles, essays, poems, dramas, and art. They also make presentations, lead workshops, facilitate groups, and organize programs. Below are some of our members' achievements this year.

If you're an SCN member who has made the news, please let us know by sending email to [news@storycircle.org](mailto:news@storycircle.org). If you've published a book, we'll also add you to our SCN Authors page.

### November, 2010

**Morgan O'Donnell's** poem "Adult Drinks" was published in the Fall issue of *Bi Women*.

**Linda Wisniewski** was a winner of the *Obit Magazine* fall essay contest.

**Judy Alter** was inducted into the Fort Worth Public Library Texas Literary Hall of Fame. Judy was a guest blogger on *Kindle Author*, interviewed by David Wisheart, and she was also a guest blogger on *Writing Well is the Best Revenge* on the memoir class she teaches, which relies heavily on Susan Albert's book, *Writing for Life*.

**Betty Auchard's** second memoir, *The Home for the Friendless*, was published this month. Watch for the Nov/Dec issue of *The Senior Voice* for their interview and review.

### October, 2010

**Marlene Samuels** and her partner Nancy Gershman are two home chefs who've completed a major updating to their culinary website, [www.expendableedibles.com](http://www.expendableedibles.com)—the only community cookbook of gourmet recipes and treatments for "expendable edibles." Their focus is on brilliantly simple gourmet rescues of "perfectly good foods that just aren't perfect anymore". Their website boasts a treasure trove of more than 100 gourmet recipes and treatments for foods that have "lost their beauty pageant looks".

**Lois Halley** tells us, "When *Johns Hopkins Magazine* asked their readers, 'What makes you happy?' I responded and was pleased that my answer was one of those published in their Fall 2010 issue." In addition, Lois' article, "Amazing Sparkle," appears in *Looking Back* magazine's October-November 2010 issue.

### September, 2010

**Susan Wittig Albert** had two books published this month: the seventh book in her popular Cottage Tales series: *The Tale of Oat Cake Crag* (Berkley Prime Crime); and *An Extraordinary Year of Ordinary Days* (Univ. Texas Press).

**Linda Thune's** poem, "This Wind," was published on the *Red Ravine* blog.

**Linda Hoyer** wrote about her first visit to the local library and submitted it to the *Covington Reporter*, her local paper. They then hired her to be a monthly contributor.

**Sharon Blumberg** recently had an article published for *Viatouch Teacher Resources*, an online magazine for teachers. The article, entitled "Creating Time Capsules," is for teachers to implement for their writing or reading classes. Sharon has also been accepted as an official VOYA book reviewer.

**Susan J. Tweit** has been in print all over in August and September. She and her husband, sculptor Richard Cabe, were featured in *The Nature Conservancy's* "Colorado is My Place" campaign, in an ad in the August issue of Denver's *5280 Magazine*, recognizing their work to clean up and restore the block of urban creek that runs next to their property. September brings three more Tweit appearances, including the first edition of her new column, "The Whole Life", in *Zone 4 Magazine*, on simple ways to lower the carbon footprint of your yard and garden; "Dying to Be Green," a feature on environmentally friendly practices at the end of life in *Audubon Magazine*; and "Beetle Mania," about Great Sand Dunes' National Park's signature insect in *National Parks Magazine*. Tweit is also taking her popular "Words to Live By" weeklong creative writing workshop/retreat back to enchanted Isla Espiritu Santo in the Sea of Cortez off Baja California this winter. Details on her website at <http://www.susanjtweit.com>.



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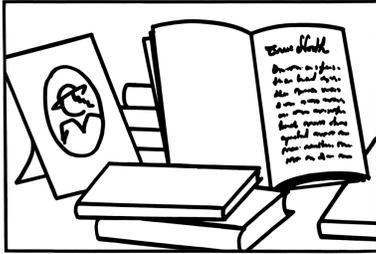


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frmadvertising.php](http://www.storycirclebookreviews.org/frmadvertising.php)



## Story Circle Network's Book Reviews Book Corner

by Susan Ideus

**Exciting news from Story Circle Book Reviews! We have our first SuperNova Reviewers—Judith Helburn and Susan Wittig Albert. Both of these women have completed over 100 book reviews and/or author interviews. What a great milestone for them and for SCBR. We're just so proud!**

What's in your stack of to-be-read books these days? Light fare to get you through the busy holidays or to get you over the past months of political shouting and storming? Perhaps you're looking into cookbooks or craft books with an eye towards gifting. Maybe you've discovered a favorite new author, or reading up on current events/concerns.

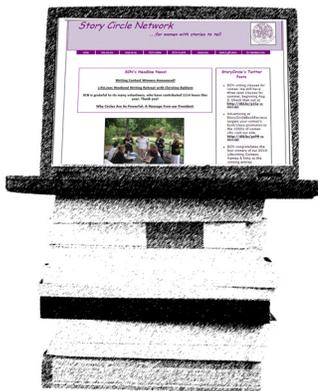
What form does your reading take these days? Hardcover, softcover, or e-book—what's your pleasure? I wonder, readers, how many of you have come over to the world of e-books? You know that you don't have to have an e-reader like a Kindle or Nook to explore this latest publication wave, right? Both of these applications, and perhaps others, are available for your PC as a free download. Just check their websites. If you have a "smart phone," you should be able to download the e-reader apps to those as well.

Now, I'm a lover of everything to do with books, and one might think this has been a hard transition for me. Not so much. I love reading so much that it is hard for me to be without a book at hand. This new technology has made it possible for me to read wherever I am. If I am stuck in traffic, stopped dead with time to kill, I no longer fret as much. I pull out my phone and read. Bliss! If I have to wait in a doctor's office for an appointment, same thing—no more old office magazines for me! I have carried real books with me in the past, and at times, I still do, but now I'm never unprepared for that extra reading time that might come my way. And, of course, if you're into instant gratification, it does take only seconds to download a new book. Awesome!

How is this affecting us at SCBR? So far, not too much, but I feel this will change. Many publishers are making their galleys available to reviewers in e-book form now. I've dealt with one small publisher who only uses this method of distribution. I have had great success with a service called NetGalley. They have new publishers coming on board weekly, with a huge array of books, in every genre imaginable. The idea is to download a galley, read it and submit a review through NetGalley to the publisher. It's not required that a review be submitted, but it's a good idea if you want to continue to use the service. A publisher can look at your profile and decide not to make a book available to you. We're in the process of deciding if such a service could be useful for our reviewers. More to come on this in the near future.

Compromise and adjustment are sometimes necessary. No more writing in the margins, although you can highlight passages in an e-book, write notes, and go back to them if you're reading for review. This has been the hardest transition for me. I love sticky notes and flags and highlighters—and use them liberally when I have a book in my hands for review. Still, I've been able to cope, and I've written a number of reviews from e-books.

Is this the wave of the future? Will e-books replace the written page? These questions will be debated long and often in the near future. How do you feel about it? Pros and cons abound. E-books certainly take up less physical space and are wonderful for traveling. They require fewer natural resources in terms of trees used for paper and energy required for the printing process. However, the e-readers are electronic devices that will wear out and/or become outdated—and what of the pollution factor in getting rid of the old ones? No easy or quick answers.



## Story Circle Network's Online Classes

**Here are just a few of the reviews we've received from our students:**

I now have a better grasp of the quality of my writing and the process. I also have a plan of action and a timeline. I can do this! And I am excited about it. Thanks SCN!

—Gail A., Markham ON Canada

I found this class to be extremely helpful. I wasn't sure how this format would work, or how well it would facilitate the learning that I wanted to get from the class, but I have to say that I am 100% satisfied. The comments each week were very relevant and useful, and provided concrete suggestions that I can take and apply to future projects.

—Linda H., Auburn WA

**Watch for the announcement of Winter Term (Jan 10 - Mar 7) classes at:  
[www.storycircleonlineclasses.org](http://www.storycircleonlineclasses.org)**



## SCN's LifeWriters Group

# Daily Ideas and Inspirations

by Dani Greer

The SCN LifeWriters Group on Yahoo.com boasts 130 members, many who post more than one message a week. This group is very active, and you can join the conversation. Go to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/scnlifewriters/>

Our SCN LifeWriters Group “meets” every day on Yahoo, exchanging emails about our lives, our writing, and our interests. The discussions range widely, but we have themes that give us a bit of focus. For instance, every Thursday, Regina Moser kicks off our Ecology and Local Foods theme. Here’s Regina’s prompt and a sampling of the lively discussion on this topic:

Hello Dear SCN Lifewriters--

The holidays are fast approaching, and for a while the grocery store has felt like a war zone with Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas all doing battle for the all mighty dollar. I am wondering if how you celebrate the holidays has changed in response to being more mindful of the environment?

I have always reused gift bags and have begun to buy colorful kitchen towels. And use the towels to wrap simple gifts from the kitchen, like homemade blueberry jam.

What’s cooking in your kitchen? I have been fortunate to find tomatoes at the farmers market and made a simple tomato sauce with fresh mushrooms and garlic lightly simmered over goat cheese and ricotta ravioli. Topped with fresh basil and parsley. Yum!

Bobbi C. shares this:

Ours has been a gradual change over the years since we've been mindful of the environment for quite some time. Now, we give every purchase that we make a lot of thought before buying. We've also quit shipping gifts and send gift cards or checks with a handmade card instead to my mother and sister (I hate all the wasted plastic with the gift cards). That's what they want and need, so we're all happy.

I love the idea of using kitchen towels to wrap homemade gifts since I cannot resist gorgeous textiles. A friend has been giving us plates of homemade goodies now for five years, and now I bake stuff and give it back to her on one of the plates she gave me from a previous year. That's a lot of fun!

From Deborah Lee:

For years, I have re-used bags and saved old holiday cards to make name tags for the next year. Last year, I pretty much did away with wrapping the gifts I was sending through the mail - just put name tags on them. My mother was the save-the-old-gift-wrap queen. When she passed, we found a huge box of old holiday wrap in the attic.

Dani adds one of her favorite tips:

For packaging, I've started saving food containers of all sizes

(all those ones with plastic lids) and cover them with scrap fabric and trims, then tuck my hand-knit socks or scarves into them. Or home-baked cookies. I've even padded the lids and covered them for an extra nice touch.

And we always love hearing from Khadijah (who participates from her home in faraway Yemen). She gives us a global perspective:

We are having our second Eid next week—the children are all making gifts out of things we already have—so lots of sewing, crocheting, beading, carpentry work, you name it going on. Every time you enter a room something gets whisked away, lots of mysterious bags all over the place. We save wrapping paper, ribbons, all that. Sometimes to wrap again, sometimes to use for some other gift project.

We had eggplants this week. Way, way, way too many eggplants. Just the thought of eggplant makes me a little queasy. But for the Eid we are getting a chicken—we only have chicken once every couple of months, so that is exciting for everyone. This is how we make it:

Saute 3 medium onions, chopped. When they are almost translucent add 5 cloves of garlic, minced. Saute for a minute or two more. Then add:

About three tablespoons of grated ginger root  
5 cloves, whole  
5 cardamom pods, slightly opened  
1 large cinnamon stick  
1 tsp ground coriander  
1 tsp ground cumin  
salt and pepper as you like them

Saute, stirring constantly, for a few more minutes- say three. Add one chicken, skinned and cut into pieces. Brown on all sides. While it is browning, mix in a small bowl:

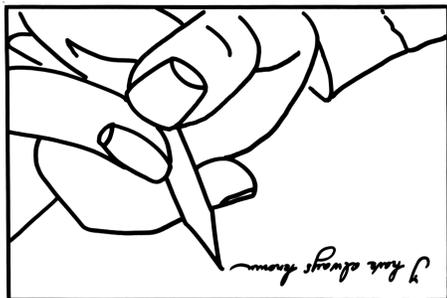
1 1/2 cups yogurt  
3 tbsp shredded coconut if you have it  
3 tbsp raisins  
1 1/2 cups water

Cover tightly and simmer for about 45 minutes, until chicken is done. Serve with rice or bread.

We wish all the Story Circle Network members the happiest of holidays, and hope you consider joining our online chat in the New Year. Just sign up at

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

*Peace and all good, everyone!*



## True Words from Real Women

# In The Bleak Midwinter

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 "In The Bleak Midwinter." Contribute your own True Words to the Journal. Future topics are listed on page 24.

### My Question: Their Secret

Susan LaBrose, Schulenburg TX  
labrose@cvctx.com

Why was I given up? The haunting question of many adoptees.

At age forty-five I decided to search for my biological parents and the answer to my question. My altered birth certificate and a tattered document, titled "Baby Girl Smith," were the only clues I had. They led my search to the Courthouse, where I was told, "Yes, there is a file on your adoption, but you do not have the right to see it. The file is sealed and only Court approved persons can access it."

I would have to pay a stranger to find out about my birth, my family, my history. My medium, Daris, made the arrangements, reviewed my files, and called me. While she patiently read the reports, carefully leaving out identifying data, I scribbled notes.

What I learned was clear. My mother and father had been married to each other. They had two boys before divorcing. One year after the divorce they reconciled and I was born. They later remarried and remained married.

Now my question was screaming!

When Daris found them, they were living in a small Texas town a few hours from my home. They agreed to communicate and I received the first letter from my mother. During the first year we wrote about our families, occasionally including photographs. We were gradually learning about one another.

Then we met. They recognized my "Smith" eyes instantly. Seeing was believing. A polite, reserved relationship developed. Neither my brothers nor other family members were told of my existence. I was a secret I felt I had to respect; my question would wait.

Then, one bleak midwinter evening, four years later, a man called and asked to speak to Jack. I asked who was calling and he replied, "Curtis Smith." I knew the name. The caller was my biological brother. Handing the phone to my husband, I felt something was terribly wrong.

SL and Noble Lee, my birth parents, had been killed in an automobile accident a few weeks earlier. My letters had been found.

Their secret is now family history, but my question will remain unanswered.

### The Remember Ring

Lois Halley, Westminster MD

I can get lost in the ring. It is a narrow gold band in 14 karat, with a round red stone of no monetary value. As I look into the brilliant facets, I see swirls of light which turn to swirls of snow in my mind's eye. I travel back in time some eighty years, to when my mother, Mary Morott, was a young teen-ager.

It was the middle of winter and the small town in the shadow of the Pocono Mountains was being covered by snow and gusting winds. Mary wiped the condensation from the large front window of her father's hardware store to peer out. Mike Morott had closed his shop early because of the storm, but Mary could see a woman holding an infant and sheltering two small children huddling in the doorway.

Very few cars were on the road, but there were occasional folks hurrying home, so she went back into the kitchen where she and her three sisters were helping their mother, Apolonia, prepare supper for the family of ten. The living quarters, behind and above the store, had no central heat, but the kitchen was warm and cozy.

Before setting the table, Mary, feeling the excitement that sometimes comes in a storm, went to look outside again. "Matka," she called, using the Polish for mother. "A woman has been here for an hour, and I think she is crying."

"You must bring her in, Marisha," Apolonia replied.

Soon the strangers were gathered around the kitchen stove, the woman sipping hot coffee while her children drank cups of warm milk. The mother related, in a thick Italian accent, how they had been evicted into the storm. Her husband had left them in the shelter of the doorway while he walked the town in search of work or a place for them to stay.

"Who could do such a thing?" asked Mike, banging his fist on the kitchen table. "My four sons will go to find your husband, and you will all stay here."

They stayed until spring, when the man was able to find a job in New York. The ring I now wear was their gift to Mary, who first brought them in from the snow. I am proud of the compassion and generosity of my ancestors, and the ring makes me remember to try to do some good every day of my life.



## The Very Coldest Winter I Can Remember

Barbara Youngblood Carr  
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I thought the winter of 1960, when I was alone in Bordentown, New Jersey, with our baby son, Curtis, waiting to travel to Germany to join my military husband, was the worst one I would ever experience. The day in December before I left on a German ocean liner there had been a blizzard in New York City that stopped most traffic, even there, and only a few adventurous taxi drivers were on the road.

After arriving in New York City and waiting all day in the open-ceiling seating area of Penn Station until eight pm, our ship sailed at midnight for Germany. The baby and I arrived at the port of Bremerhaven a few days before Christmas.

Upon arrival in Germany, we lived in a Gasthaus (hotel) which was mostly unheated. They only turned on the radiator a few times each day. Baby Curtis and I stayed there all day while my husband was at work. The baby huddled underneath the heavy goose-down federdecker pulled up to his little chin where he was very quiet and still.

The winter of 1962 surpassed that first Christmas and winter spent in Germany. It went on record as their coldest winter in fifty years. The Rhine River, equivalent to our American Mississippi River, froze solid.

We lived in government quarters then, but the man who was supposed to maintain the furnace in the basement of the four-story building was off for the holidays, so we had no heat. There was ice on the inside of our windows. The babies (two now) slept in their snowsuits and I dressed in heavy sweaters and my coat.

The fact that this was another Christmas/New Year's season spent away from loved ones and family made it seem even colder. It was one of the six years we did not visit or speak to our families because we lived in Germany, since trips back home and phone calls were too expensive.

## One Snowflake at a Time

Lynn Weiss, Lake Dallas TX

Hushed time quietly wraps its arms around me, muted by snowflakes in deepest winter. Surrounded by starkness, my inner core of power is softened, tenderized by changes reminiscent of youth. I'm lingering, at the near zero point of coldness. Yet, in this time of stillness, I begin to recall inner visions—visions nestled between snowflakes.

I recall a young woman, vulnerable to the point of mist. She has no idea of how to live. She has no sense of what to do or how to ask for help, for her feelings are dulled to the immobility of a constant ache.

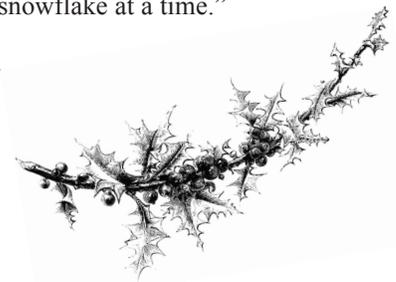
I reach out to her as I reach within me now from a strength garnered from years of survival. I find myself in the stark surroundings she knew. Though time seems to stand still in the silence of a snowfall, I can bridge the years to her.

I hold her softly within my heart, while respectfully reassuring her. And I tell her the story that is both hers and mine. I tell her of the coming of a future, one not yet unfolded. I say, "I will show you the way even though the path is unknown to me. I have learned the means for us to face the unknown.

"We will leave footprints in the snow to show how far we've walked. Looking back I can see how many steps I've taken to bring us here. But looking forward, it doesn't matter that we don't know how many more we'll take. After all, each answer to every question drifts to us one snowflake at a time, gently settling for you and me to view.

"Forever, now, I will carry you within me so you can see through my eyes. No winter emptiness can cause us fear. No lack of growth in mid-winter bleakness will concern us, be they memories from your past or unknowns in our future.

"Your youth supports my wisdom and together, we will choose clearly: One snowflake at a time."



## Rest in Peat

Diana Nolan, LaGrange TN  
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Around this time of year I always plan to spend time at the cemetery. My plant cemetery. Many gardeners maintain a similar operation commonly known as a compost pile. I could not think of placing my dear departed plants in a "pile." Many of those lost have been loyal friends hanging in there and bearing with me what may be for some of them towering pressures.

The cemetery, tucked in a secluded area of my yard, is the protector of plants that have performed their best and have now been left to return their remaining qualities or quirks to the earth. This is a quiet place for meditation. I contemplate what brought my plants to this place. I wonder how they became sick. Did

they receive too much sun, or not enough? Perhaps a disease or insect caused their demise. Sometimes I can deduce their cause of death. Too often they carry their secret to the grave.

Very soon the cemetery will be covered with a warm blanket of boughs from the Christmas tree. If I am lucky, there will be a surprise—a warm day during the darkest time of winter. Maybe such a day will stretch into several or even a week. Then, one or two of my cherished plants will outwit Mother Nature to stage a recovery. In the meantime, I await spring.

## The Door Slammed

Abby November, Bronx NY  
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I was twelve years old, the Brooklyn sky was grey; and the sun hadn't visited our street for weeks. The leaves were gone and a chilly gloom settled upon us as we got ready to burrow in for the winter months. My granddad (Zayde in Yiddish) had been acting weird in the past weeks. Agitated, he really missed his job at Grand Central Post Office in New York City. He was forced to take retirement at age sixty-seven and he missed the work, smoking, drinking, and schmoozing that went on during the grave yard shift. Besides, he secretly told me, being home fulltime with "your grandma, the Bubs, would make me meshugana" (nuts!).

Zayde used to take me for walks to the candy store dubbed "Crazy Joe's." He would buy Camels—no filters—and get me an egg cream for a nickel. What a special treat, just Zayde and me. The other three siblings were not interested in spending time with "an old man" or were still in diapers.

I waited for Zayde after school. My gloves had holes in them and I remember trying to stuff my hands in my pea coat pockets for warmth. Mom would be annoyed that my gloves again needed repair. I was not competent enough to do it right, so it fell to her.

As I waited for Zayde for our walk to crazy Joe's I told the bubs and my parents, "This is not right, he's always here to walk me." When darkness fell at five pm, a police car came to our house with Zayde in it. He was found confused and wandering the neighborhood, but was able to state his name.

There was a conference between my folks, the police, and Bubs resulting a call to our family doctor. Seemingly within minutes, an ambulance arrived from the local hospital.

I watched from the creepy darkness of my parents bedroom window ledge as drivers gently put Zayde in the back of the ambulance. My thoughts begged him to look up, turn, wave... anything.

But the door slammed. I never saw Zayde again, nor said goodbye.



## Radiance Everlasting

Lois Halley, Westminster MD

Julianna was such a summer person. Everything about her radiated warmth, from her shoulder-length red hair, to her dazzling smile, to her outgoing personality.

It was in the summer that she did her best entertaining. "I'll send David to pick you up," she'd say. Her husband arrived in his single engine plane and flew us to a day or week-end of adventure.

Jule might have planned sipping wine at their pool, or taking the sunfishes out for day sailing on the river. We might play couples tennis, just for fun, as she hated score keeping. One breezy day we bought kites and flew them on the beach.

Some week-ends were spent on their 30 foot sailboat, anchored-out on the bay overnight, being rocked gently by the waves. We would have taken the dinghy for dinner at a dockside restaurant.

They were not ostentatious about their entertaining but wanted to share their luxuries with their friends. In the same spirit, Julianna, an RN, worked the late night shift three times a week in a nursing home. "It's where I'm needed most," she said.

It was in that harshest of seasons, when the sky is the same grey color as the snow which sat around too long, that Jule was

diagnosed with an incurable illness. She cried to me, not for herself, but for her twelve year old son who would not have his mother as he reached life's milestones. Having no words, I cried with her.

Jule loved a party and said she wanted to dazzle one last time. She lighted up the room, in her silver sequined mini and white leather boots. No one could tell how ill she was.

Calling me aside, she said she did not want people crying at her funeral. She wanted a wine and cheese party with people laughing and enjoying themselves.

That winter, when she was laid to rest, her husband and mother provided a traditional funeral, and cry we did. The dreams started soon after. Jule would appear, looking vaguely discontented, saying nothing. I finally understood. That summer, in Jule's favorite season, I held a wine and cheese party in her memory. People laughed and shared happy stories, and the dreams stopped. It was then that I realized she wasn't lost to the universe but just resting in peaceful memory.

## again and again

Susan Powers Bourne, Saxtons River VT  
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sunlight fades and sets hills aglow—  
 shadows grow ever-darker green.  
 spirits soar above cold rooftops—  
 souls drop inside cracked earth.  
 hearts wander to unknown heights  
 where infinite awareness awakens.  
 starry planets seldom heard, sing—  
 sign renewal with each passing arc.  
 birds alight on bright berries, leave  
 branches empty against white skies.  
 seasons turn, dance, and disappear—  
 while we each gather in as we can.

## The Making of a Hero

Judy Watters, Spring Branch TX  
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Back in the hills of Pennsylvania, my siblings and I really did have to walk a mile to reach the school bus, down a huge hill. So after school, that same hill greeted us again, only this time going in the opposite direction. Following a particularly vicious ice storm, my older brother showed his true heroic colors.

By holding onto trees at the side of the road and after many spills, we finally stood at the top. Gingerly, we all turned to marvel at the sheet of ice. But in adjusting her books, my sister experienced the unthinkable: her vinyl gym bag escaped and sped to the very bottom of that glassy hill. The whole world held its breath. Virginia finally broke the silence.

“Rodney, go get my bag. We’ll wait here for you.”

There was no arguing. Virginia and I sat down and cuddled together for warmth.

The going down was not that hard. Rodney lay on his back and away he slid. At the bottom, he grabbed the bag and held it up to show he was halfway through his mission. We watched him make the agonizing climb back up again, holding onto the same trees that he had ten minutes earlier. With daylight fading, he finally made it to the top.

“Whew! There you are, madam,” he joked, and with great pride presented the treasured bag to Virginia. But the evasive bag seemed to have a mind of its own. Somewhere in the handing over of the bag, it hit the ice and again raced to the bottom.

No one spoke. That deadening silence returned. Virginia and I slowly turned our heads toward Rodney, our hero, and met his face of horror. As the darkness closed around us, Rodney started his descent. I don’t know if it was Rodney’s fear of a beating from his big sister or his desire for sainthood, but on that bleak mid-winter afternoon, he made many tiny steps up that ice for Big Sister and one giant leap for Brotherhood!

My maternal grandmother, who lived near her only child, died in 1977. She disliked the bleakness of winters and enjoyed cooking a good dinner to keep away the blues. On a snowy day, we’d make our way to her house. Even now during a dark gray winter day, when I cook soup or a big meal, I think of her. It makes the gloom away.

My parents, younger sister, and I went to my grandmother’s home for holiday dinners, occasional Sunday dinners, and birthdays. She was an excellent cook who worked hard to make her special meals. She would take out the best china and set the table with starched linens. She did everything herself and only relied on the adult women to help dry the dishes. When I remember back to those days, one of the memories that stands out is that no matter when we visited, she always had on her



## Celery and Snow

Judith Bjorck, Liverpool NY  
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We were in the middle of a typical Northern New York snow storm. The temperature had dropped well below freezing and large flakes of snow were tumbling from the gray sky, mounding in drifts rapidly reaching five feet. It was definitely not a day to go out unless you had to.

Since I was retired, I had the luxury of reading by the warm fireplace. As I was reading, however, I began to get the strangest craving for celery. I had bought some the day before to put into a soup, but it was definitely not a vegetable I would eat on its own as I found it rather tasteless. For reasons I couldn’t explain, I started imagining small, crisp bites of celery and could sense their cold ridges on my tongue. Finally, I gave in and went to the kitchen to clean and cut up the packaged celery in my refrigerator.

When I brought the celery to the sink and looked out the window, I was surprised to see my working neighbor’s elderly mother, Grandma Elsa, coming around the corner of their attached garage with one of their dogs on a leash and her cane in the other hand. Hatless and with her coat open, she apparently expected to attend to the dog’s needs quickly, but with the wind blowing and the snow piling up fast, the dog could barely get through the drifts. In his agitation, he began to run around Grandma Elsa, surrounding her legs with the leash. She fell down in the snow and could not get up.

I ran to the front door, put on my boots, and pushed through the snow toward her. It only took a few minutes to get Grandma Elsa up and the leash loosened from her legs. Soon she and the dog were inside and safe from what could easily have been frost bite or hypothermia before they had been found.

I returned to the kitchen, finished cleaning the celery and put it back in the refrigerator without eating any. After all, I was not fond of celery.

clean, neatly ironed cotton apron. She always wore the same style of cotton with brightly colored prints of dots or flowers and buttoned up the front. It didn’t have a collar and was sleeveless.

My grandfather died before my grandmother. I felt like I was invading her privacy helping my mother and sister go through everything in her neat little cottage. When we came to the aprons, I was especially sad. I touched them remembering my sweet grandmother standing at the front door as we arrived for dinner. She would always wipe her hands on the apron before we got a big hug. I kept a couple of the aprons and started wearing them during meal preparation in my kitchen until they became frayed. Now I only have pictures to look at of her smiling in the kitchen wearing her apron. It was a special time that will never come back but I am so fortunate to be part of that past.

## Aprons

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## A Million Shades of Gray

Tiffany Benton, Port Townsend WA  
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In the bleakness of mid-winter the days on Discovery Bay start late and end early. The sun rises and sets behind Eaglemount. Months are spent in shadow.

I lived on the Olympic Peninsula for twenty years before moving to Maui. At the time of our relocation I was sick of northwest cloudy days, weeks, months. I wanted sun! I could see no beauty in the bleak of winter, only the color gray. Life felt like it held no variety and only a move far away would save us.

So my husband and I packed up the kids and moved to an island in the Pacific bathed in sunlight. We wanted them to experience options, like the warm waters off the coast of Kihei, the rainforest of Hana, and the incredible mixture of wonderful cultures.

The years went by, our skin tanned in the Maui sun, and the kids grew to be wonderful adults, eager to experience life off the island. I too grew restless. Where were the daffodils that bloom in the first days of spring and the ducks that swim on the gray winter waters of the Bay?

So seventeen years later we all resettled back on the mainland. Greg and I moved to Discovery Bay in northwest Washington and our kids are happily spread out along the west coast.

I sit and stare out the window. Where there's no wind the water perfectly reflects the dark green and brownish reds of the surrounding tree covered hills. Where the tide moves the water along and the wind ruffles its surface, the grays are silver matching the cloudy sky. Herons feed on shellfish, eagles dive for salmon, and ducks are everywhere.

I no longer feel trapped in the northwest and instead see beauty and variety everywhere. There are a million shades of gray to soothe my soul. Still, I miss my children and at this moment my heart feels a bleak mid-winter ache. Are we ever totally satisfied with what we have? I sigh then smile! Gratitude fills my heart. I know everything is as it should be.

## In the Bleak Winter

Abby November, Bronx NY  
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Fleeting fall leaves crunched into gravel  
Crisp crunchy apples, steaming cider fogging windows  
Gray cloudy dark dreary, days fading into  
Premature blackness of night  
Cold bitter souls cloaked in coats of down  
Wandering in dreary canyons of urban soot  
Snow snow, where is the sun?  
Gone south for warmth  
Smile-less faces wrapped in sweat soaked heavy coats  
Crammed in underground tunnels which shake like the approach of  
A lumbering dinosaur. The train arrives in its timeless weather less tunnel

## Journey Through that Bleak Midwinter

Jean Hough, San Diego CA

The tentacles of that bleak midwinter nine years ago still stretch and grasp my being. My beloved mother had finally been admitted to the hospital following 12 grueling hours in the ER. Her agony pierced my heart and paralyzed my mind. I was sent home to arrange for her expected transfer to either a nursing facility or home health care.

A revelation led me to call Sally, our church's parish nurse. Sally embraced me with compassion and empathy. Her expertise as a nurse and her familiarity with local home health agencies provided the professional guidance I desperately needed. She arranged meetings with hospital, hospice, and home health agency personnel and facilitated each session. Her strength and wisdom pasted me together as this Humpty Dumpty teetered on the brink of a black void.

Seventeen days later, we had arranged around-the-clock CNA-level care. Mother was due to be released from the hospital. Sally accompanied me to Mother's hospital room, where the hospice nurse broke the news: "Your internist just left. He said your mother will not last the day and is too frail and fragile to be moved."

Mother knew I believed caring for her was my reason for still being alive: therefore, she feared how I would survive her death. Our doctor's prognosis forced me to summon my minuscule supply of intestinal fortitude and make a deathbed promise. Caressing Mother's precious face, I whispered words of love and gratitude and told her she could let go and be with God, that He had sent an angel to help me and I would be okay. While steadying me emotionally, Sally arranged for Reverend Carolyn to administer last rites.

After Mother's death, I joined two bereavement groups. Sally, my angel, continued her ministry to me, now as friend and mentor. Healing came slowly as these resources allowed me to express my grief. In time, I discerned work God placed on my heart, plans promising challenge and, yes, a glimmer of hope and joy. Still, that bleak midwinter has left a cavernous hole in my being. Like a lost child, I want my mommy.



Santa long gone to his Arctic climes  
Rain teases its way thru ugly grey cotton clouds  
Cleansing urban soot from the grey unwelcome concrete  
Streets swollen with rain pushed detritus  
Mud soaked boots, dress shoes, umbrella turned to heaven.  
Wait I spy a struggle  
A tiny green vine breaking thru the crevice in concrete  
Its hands uplifted as if to thank God  
Spring has come...

## Mudear's Gumbo

Carolyn McCraw, Houston TX

OWL circle, Lone Star College—North Harris Campus  
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## The Warmest Winter Gift

Laurinda Wheeler, Calgary, Canada  
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I learned the lesson of a lifetime on a cold winter day in 1978. It was the kind of day that you wanted to stay inside, in front of the fireplace with a gigantic cup of cocoa. It was the kind of day a good movie would be perfect from the comfort of the couch. It was Saturday and I had the whole weekend ahead to do just that. However, things were about to change. My husband wanted me to make a gumbo because he had invited friends over for dinner. I didn't know how to make gumbo, an art and truly a gift that I didn't have. He pointed out that on such a cold wintery day, gumbo would be the perfect meal to serve. He told me it was easy to make, just call his mom, Mudear.

Mudear, as she is known by everyone, cooked for every family activity. She cooked for the family reunions. She prepared meals for every holiday. Her church called upon her to cook for various church functions. I quickly called Mudear and told her my dilemma.

Mudear said she'd make a house call. This situation was an emergency; it was more serious than I thought. When she arrived she taught me how to make gumbo. After what seemed like hours of cutting, dicing, deveining, sautéing, and boiling, we finally put it all together. The fine aroma filled the house with all the seafood, herbs, and spices. She said that her job was done. I really did appreciate her coming over to help me. She was 911 to my rescue.

On this cold wintery day I could still sit in front of the fireplace with a good movie, good friends, and a bowl of good gumbo. It was a lesson well learned.

Mudear taught all of her daughters, daughters in law, granddaughters, nieces, and some of the guys how to utilize her cooking techniques. She advises us to keep on cooking, and the family thanks her for her cooking passion and sharing her expertise with us.



I felt so much anticipation and doubt as winter took its hold on us that year. Times were tough in all senses of the matter; it was colder than I can ever remember, we were moving, and my husband's work had slowed to a near standstill. The day drew closer and I felt so unprepared, alone, and scared; I had thought the day would never actually come for me.

Every day that passed also brought more intense, wicked pain in my back. For a month I spent every day switching from one odd position to the next; turning, kneeling, rocking, walking, and bathing. My days were consumed by little more. I told myself that the event couldn't be worse than what I was experiencing; if so, I was in serious trouble.

Finally, we went to the hospital. There were no beds, so we were given the option to walk the halls; thank goodness for pain medication, but we went home.

Within twenty-four hours I was woken up by excruciating pain, so I went for a shower, hoping to find some relief. I remember thinking "Uh-oh" as I bent down to turn the tap off. I went to my sleeping husband, softly touched his leg, "Hon, I think you should probably get up." A quick phone call and we were on our way.

Our doctor broke my water immediately. I remember the back labor most vividly. They unsuccessfully tried three times to give me an epidural; I truly don't think I will ever forget that pain. I was up, down, on all fours, and at one point getting high from the oxygen. Nearly twelve hours later, it was time. Thankfully, I was so focused on what I needed to do that I don't recall that pain.

Although it had started out to be the coldest and dreariest of winters, there was a light that shone brighter and warmer than the sunshine has ever been able to do for me.

Our daughter was born!



## Midwinter is Mystery

Carol Ziel, St. Louis MO  
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The earth a shallow grave scattered  
With the skeletons of twigs and autumn flowers  
A sleeping giant lying like a heavy blanket on our souls.  
The sky layered with shades of gray  
Wraps around us like a cocoon  
Stifles hope, suffocates dreams of fireflies and Russian sage  
Clouds heavy with winter's promise smudge the horizon  
Cold claims the land  
And sometimes our spirit.  
Yet here is the mystery  
The earth is also a cauldron that cradles spring's promise  
The life that slept above, now sleeps below  
Waiting for the call to rise through hushed snow.  
Winter is it's season  
Nature only seems to hold it's breath  
Until the mercurial sky opens up fragrant bulbs  
And witchhazel blooms again.

## Turning Toward the Light

Judy Whelley, Dayton OH  
w-ecircle 3

I was running on pure intuition while hosting my first Winter Solstice gathering. Winter Solstice marks the shortest day and therefore the longest night of the year. I loved the idea of celebrating the return of the light.

The past few years had been mostly darkness: relationship betrayal, divorce, my mother's death, and cancer. Family rituals and traditions were abandoned. I wanted a new tradition. After so much pain, I wanted to embrace life, appreciate the now, and live with awareness and intention.

My goal was to create a space where each woman could speak from her heart, where we could witness one another's intentions and desires. I invited eight women. All were my friends but not everyone knew one another.

I asked each woman to wear white, symbolizing light. I lined my sidewalk with white paper bags filled with bright blue sand and tea lights to represent a starry night path. Once all were present and had a glass of wine, or sparkling water, I began.

I drew us in and closed the circle, creating a safe and sacred space where each woman was honored and accepted. I gave each woman a lit candle. I shared some information about the solstice and asked anyone willing to speak to name what she wanted to leave in the darkness and what she wanted to embrace in the coming light. A brief silence allowed everyone time to ponder her choices.

I began. I gave back to the darkness the pain of divorce, the ache of betrayal, the fear of cancer. My intention was to allow joy into my life, to embrace my creativity, and to open to new love. This I placed in the light.

Each woman spoke from her heart. Each woman shared her hopes and dreams. Each woman affirmed the others. Each woman lent support, understanding, and energy to the all.

Deeply touched by the honesty and courage of the women, I closed the circle. We blew out the candles that light the darkness and welcomed the return of nature's light and the light within us all.



## Lamb Stew

Polly Grose, Wayzata MN  
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Our London flat opened to an outside gallery passage to the stairs and the street. Returning home from work on a bleak midwinter evening, I stepped onto the passage and from the slightly ajar kitchen window, I inhaled a pungent surprise: lamb covered with rosemary braising on the stove for David's special stew. Through the window pane, I could see him slicing carrots and onions, sloshing red wine into the pan as he sang accompanying a Mozart aria on the stereo. Welcoming me at the door, his hands flecked with bits of vegetable, we hugged to celebrate another joyful winter evening. Lights blazed from all the lamps in our tiny flat as the music filled the flat.

Daylight hours are short during London's winter months. The sun does not rise before eight o'clock and darkness falls by four pm. Sleet, rain, and sometimes snow added harshness to the gray skies. One could wish to hibernate until the crocuses and snowdrops pierced the earth to signal spring. At my workplace basement office I had only a skylight for natural light, and at lunch time I walked often through fog and mist to a sandwich cafe at the corner of Bryanston Square, shaking my umbrella or sidestepping the icy sidewalks. At the end of the day I savored the promise of the bright warm evening with my husband.

Before I moved to London I worked in downtown Minneapolis, and during the winter months as temperatures often dropped, and remained for days, well below zero, I dreaded the 30 minute drive home to enter a dark and silent house, touch the light switch, and check the fridge for paltry leftovers. No one there, my sons were grown and on their own. I turned on the television for the evening news and for the voices to cover the space.

And then suddenly, as I learned that first London winter, the evenings exploded with light and musical notes and a stove crackling and bubbling with lamb stew smothered in rosemary and red wine.

## Lines

Rose Stewart, Youngsville PA

Sometimes  
When I look at you,  
I see the lines  
Etched in your skin  
And compare them despondently  
To the smoothness of my own.

Sometimes  
When I look at you,  
I see those same lines  
And realize  
That each line was a lesson  
Learned  
And I  
The beneficiary.

## My Toes

Susan Myrick, Glencoe IL

Freezing  
...All ten of them  
stuffed inside two socks  
and a pair of shoes  
snowed in and bored  
with the long blue of cold.

Dreaming  
...All ten of them  
polished pink and bare  
inside sandals  
impatient to muscle  
their way to the beach.



## A Hundred Miles

Colleen Le Beau, Berwyn IL

I took a walk in winter rain today and thought about the time  
we rode a motorcycle—cherry red, I remember...  
down a flat line of Texas highway headed north  
a hundred miles into a stormy sky, stopping  
in a one diner town for coffee  
with free refills.

We paid with all we had between our wet pockets.

We were strangers you and I, strangers  
with eyes blind to the horizon  
blind to windshield time.

Now time is measured by things done—  
measured by kids dressed and fed, bills paid, laundry folded...  
Time folded...put away...

Now you walk in the door and ask, "What did you do today?"

And I can't tell you why I studied the long dead moth in the window  
how the deceptive winter sun burnt holes  
through ghost thin wings.

And I can't say how I arranged the uneaten fruit  
into a still life pose sketching a pear's shadow  
and lines on the easel of my mind...or why  
I pulled the still pink petals from the roses you gave...  
and sprinkled them like fairy dust just to dance  
across the kitchen floor.

I don't tell you I wrote a poem about a time  
we rode a hundred miles wet to the bone  
into a stormy sky...  
we rode out the rain wet to the bone  
without a windshield  
we rode out the rain.



## Funeral March

Rose Stewart, Youngville PA

The day you died,  
Rain and wind were by my side.  
There was no time that day,  
For my grief to display.

The day we laid you to rest,  
Early May sun looked its best.  
Too many people around,  
For tears to fall to the ground.

This day in mid-May,  
Sun and warmth around me play.  
When at last all is quiet,  
Sobs through my body riot.



## A Winter Sky

June Baker Jefferson, Fayetteville AR  
jjefferson@arkansasusa.com  
r-ecircle & w-ecircle 13

Northwest Arkansas used to be just a flight path for migrating  
geese, but now it seems as if we are year-round homes for some.  
Yet it is still the sight of their formations and their calling to one  
another across a winter sky which affects me. Something about it  
tugs at me physically and viscerally. My heart flutters, instinctively  
on the wing, heading wherever home may be.

One crisp December night, they were going north to the lakes  
while I was going south to the mountains in a long line of traffic. I  
heard, then saw the undulating black lines in the sky. It looked as if  
someone had shaken coarse ground pepper onto a plate of white gravy.

But the pepper was moving into shapes: a V, then an M,  
blossoming into an arch. Our cars inched along, so I was able to  
look at the geese as they moved gracefully up the horizon, changing  
places and forming new patterns.

I remembered something I'd read about the position of  
individual birds in the formation. Supposedly, they change from  
front to back as a method of conserving strength and powering the  
forward movement of the unit; those in the back are borne along  
the draft created by those in front. The V-shape also contributes to  
this collective effort. Regardless of its accuracy, I decided to believe  
this. It gave me impetus to ease off on my accelerator and coast  
along with the crowd of vehicles I was in. A few of those in front  
of me allowed the cars on the side to get in line. This courtesy  
spread and more people were on their way down the road.

The sky darkened. We began to flick on our lights. As I looked  
ahead and in my rearview mirror, I saw we formed a glittering necklace  
moving steadily across the slopes. I wondered what the geese saw.

## In the Bleak of Winter

Carol Wessling, Bellevue NE



In the bleak of winter, how does one find the sun?  
In the cold and frigid air, where does one find warmth?  
When the snow is piling up outside, what happens to the path?  
Somehow, one just knows  
Those things are still there, just hidden.

In the midst of illness, bad news, fear, where's the light?  
In the frozen darkness of despair, what brings the thaw?  
When all that's good is hidden from sight and one despairs, where is  
healing?  
Somehow, one just knows  
Those things are still there, just hidden.

So we stumble amid the bleakness, the cold, the snow,  
And we struggle amid the depression, the doubts, the fear, because  
Somehow we just know  
That, sooner or later,  
Winter will be over.



## Winter Birthday

Susan Ideus, Las Cruces NM  
w-ecircle 4

"It's my birthday and now it will be our baby's birthday too!" I was bubbling with the excitement of it all when I called my best friend long distance that late January morning. We had waited a long time for this baby, and now to make it even more special, baby and I would share the same birthday—a phenomenon my husband and his dad shared, and loved doing so.

The day passed pleasantly with friends and family calling with birthday wishes and to get updates on labor progression. I'd checked in with the doctor's office and knew when he wanted us to make an appearance at the hospital. "This will be my best birthday ever," I gushed to Harold as we left in early evening, knowing we would see this baby in a few hours.

Harold rushed to get the admission paperwork signed as I undressed and hopped excitedly on the gurney. Nurses smiled as I let them know this was a dual celebration. Lying there, doing my breathing with each contraction, my head and heart were brimming with happy images. In just a little while...

"Fetal distress, get the attending in here stat!" I was hooked to monitors and surrounded by concerned faces. Harold barely got to the room before, "Get her to the OR now—we're losing the heartbeat!"

I woke in a fog but I could feel Harold gripping one hand and my dear devoted doctor holding the other. "We lost our baby girl, Susie," was all Harold managed to get out. "Susan, the placenta had disintegrated and the baby wasn't getting any nourishment. She was just too weak for the stress of labor." Thankfully the drugs took me back to the fog.

In the days and weeks that followed I dwelled in the grips of the bleakest winter I'd ever known. Why had this happened? No answers. What could I have done wrong? Absolutely nothing. Could it have been prevented? Not with the technology available at the time. Would I ever stop hurting? No. Would Spring ever come again? Yes, but my heart wasn't convinced. Winter lingered deeply there that year.



## Whiter Than Snow

Susan Myrick, Glencoe IL

I remember when snow rolled into snowmen  
and dressed hedges in sugar caps  
when snow tumbled over the tops of my boots  
and soaked my socks  
when snow packed into snowballs  
and numbed my soggy thumbs  
when snow froze crisp as crust  
and melted into icicle swords  
when snow tasted like cold air and cold air smelled like snow.  
I remember when snow was whiter than snow.

## No Winter Blahs Here

Susan Ideus, Las Cruces NM  
w-ecircle 4

Winter could have been long and dark and cold, as the holidays in our house were usually frenzied "all work and no play" dinners put on by my mother who surely equated tradition with obligation. There was, however, one bright spot when my quiet and unassuming father became an irrepressible little boy again. Daddy loved Christmas!

He would gather up my brothers and me and off we would go up to the nearby mountains to cut our own Christmas tree and greenery for decorations. We might find a tree right away, but then we'd look some more, just to be sure! It never failed that the tree would be several feet too tall for the living room—something to do with the scale of things in nature. Daddy would just laugh, and cut it to size.

Never trusting the store-bought ones, he made his own tree stand by mounting a metal bucket on a frame of 2x4's. Placing a brick in the bottom of the bucket, he then set the tree in, wiring it to the frame of the stand for stability. Usually, the tree was still too big and heavy to stay upright, so Daddy would wire it to the wall, much to Mother's dismay. "But it's just a small anchor—you'll never know it's there," he said merrily. "Besides, this tree is the best one ever!"

Moving from Indiana to New Mexico had made a difference in housing and heating; we no longer had a fireplace. Well, Daddy reasoned, the kids needed a mantle to hang their stockings on Christmas Eve, so he built a replica out of wood, painting it to look like bricks. Mother would let him keep it in the living room only for the holiday season, so he simply stretched the season from Thanksgiving to New Year's. Further brightening our bleak wintertime were the many lights and all of his wonderful whimsical hand-made Christmas figures filling our front yard. It was always a special time for Daddy—and for his kids. I hope I remembered to tell him so....





## Winter Was In My Heart

Sandra Schools, Granby CT  
sancamsch@gmail.com

Cold weather was closing in on that bleak November day. It had been a good summer. The long and deadly war was over. No more black outs. No more rationing. No more gruesome nightly news reports from the famed Lowell Thomas. In my eleven years of existence, life had never felt so peaceful.

Other than the war, things seemed quite uneventful for me in my early years. Of course I do not remember my mother suffering from complications as a result of my birth. She could not care for me during my first six months and very little afterward as I grew into my first birthday. My grandparents were a central part of my life until the age of six when we moved away. I remember missing them and looked forward to weekend visits. I do not believe anyone knew how attached I was. My grandparents were my security.

It was November 6, 1946. I found a note on the kitchen table when returning from school that day. "Grampa died this

morning; we have gone home." I could not believe it. I had never known death personally. During the war, the nightly news reports made the reality of death inescapable, but it never touched my heart as this did. Grief sunk deep within my soul. I could not cry. No one talked with me about it. I was just a kid. It was the adults who needed consoling.

When I was seventeen, I began to experience depression during the onset of winter days. It was not until years later, in my thirties, that the reason for my depression was brought to light. I had never openly grieved my loss. No one understood—not even me—what had happened during my first years of life. The heart of my early childhood had been cemented into the spirit of my Grampa. As I gained new understanding of the seriousness in caring for a child's heart, I began to allow myself to be filled with God's love. I still think of my beloved Grampa, but I am now cemented in Jesus.

## Taking leave

Nancilynn Saylor, Austin TX



Looking back  
It was in the bleak mid-winter;  
as we all know  
spring comes early to Texas, sometimes,  
Sometimes, before Winter scarcely gets a foothold  
often Spring taps lovingly at our doors.  
But, yes, it was December and  
mid-winter,  
and bleak, when the ocean brimmed with  
the tears of those left behind/my tears  
for I was lost,  
and we were all lost.  
The loss was just too great; my mother lost to me.  
I tried to surrender to the comfort  
of friends/but  
Somehow their consolation  
fell cold and dreary on the doorstep of my heart,  
My heart iced over by my overwhelming sense of loss.  
What made me feel my Father and siblings  
felt the loss any less?  
Nothing...  
but it was in the bleak of winter  
after all...



## Reflections

Rose Stewart, Youngsville PA

Who is that little girl  
With so much sadness on her face;  
Floating,  
As if suspended in time and  
Space.

She is floating all alone  
While colors around her play;  
Longing  
To be part of them,  
Not knowing what to say.

Her unkempt hair is dangling  
In her timid colored eyes;  
Reflecting,  
The loneliness of one who was  
Cast aside.

As I pull my own hair back  
And squint to better see . . .  
Odd,  
It is my own reflection . . .  
It is me.





## Take A Bow! Spotlighting Our Volunteers

# Mary Jo Doig

by Robin A. Edgar

**Mary Jo Doig may appear mild-mannered, but under that timid demeanor, she is a multi-faceted writer, editor, and mentor.**

**“I often think of how I consider myself SCN Home Grown,” says Mary Jo. “All in all, I have found a place here where I have been given wonderful opportunities to discover and grow in my writing skills.”**

Mary Jo was born in Pasadena, Texas a few months after Pearl Harbor Day. Her parents, Joseph and Audrey (Davis) Biittner, met when they both worked in New York City for Twentieth Century Fox. After they married, they lived briefly in Texas where, after one long, hot summer there, they were eager to move north again. They did just that, eventually becoming lifelong New Yorkers, as was Mary Jo until shortly after 2000.

“I still remember my mother and grandmother talking about the furniture getting moldy and the copperhead snake they found wrapped around my carriage wheel as I napped one summer day beneath a tree,” recalls Mary Jo.

Three years after Mary Jo was born, her disabled sister, Jacqueline, arrived, followed by her youngest sister, Bonnie, six years later. Her mother was a stay-at-home mom with her father moving the family from state to state as he went from job to job. When her mother finally put her foot down and declared that she wanted to live in one place, they moved to Center Moriches, Long Island, where her mother had grown up and where all her family still lived. That also was where Mary Jo graduated from high school.

When she entered high school, Mary Jo’s mother made it clear to her that, even though she and her father were divorced by then and she was sole support of her three daughters, she was going to send Mary Jo to college. Both of her parents grew up during the Great Depression and her mother longed to go to college, but her father had told her it was simply not possible.

“As far as she was concerned, I was going to be able to do what she had not been able to,” recalls Mary Jo. “It was one of the finest gifts my mom gave me and, although it took me ten years to attain my English Education degree, I did and it has made all the difference in my life.”

In 1973, she married a dairy farmer, Don Doig, in the tiny town of Bovina Center NY, where they raised a family and operated a small dairy farm for more than two decades. Although she wrote very little after she graduated from college, Mary Jo began to write prolifically when she uncovered repressed childhood memories in the mid-90s. Devastated by these memories, she began to keep a detailed record of what she was experiencing and, in time, discovered how powerful her writing was as a healing tool.

“When I moved to Virginia right after Y2K, I had done extensive personal work that included writing,” she recalls. “Subsequently, I found that I had stories that were figuratively oozing from my skin that I had to write — or die. I chose to write.”

A lifelong mystery lover (she has collected every book that her favorite beloved author, Agatha Christie, wrote), she inadvertently learned about SCN from a friend at work, who loved growing herbs. She told her about an herbal mystery novel by a new author, Susan Wittig Albert, and passed the book onto her. Mary Jo read and greatly enjoyed the story and the new protagonist, China Bayles, and went on to connect with Susan and Bill Albert’s Mystery Partners website ([mysterypartners.com](http://mysterypartners.com)) where she found a reference to the Story Circle Network.

“I felt deeply drawn to SCN,” says Mary Jo. “As my journaling continued, I felt also a deep ache to begin to write my stories. Joining SCN was the first New Year’s resolution of 2001 that I met early on.”

Lee Ambrose assigned Mary Jo to writing-ecircle 2 where she began to write stories that she shared shyly and with little confidence. Says Mary Jo, “Without fail, I was given wonderful encouragement with each small story I wrote by the facilitator, then Marie Buckley, and my circle members. It was amazing to be able to connect with women all over the country who loved to write life stories and was a profound gift that helped me grow amazingly in both skills and confidence. I’d finally found my peers.”

Mary Jo’s passion for writing grew and her story, “Life 101,” placed third in the 2002 SCN annual writing contest. In time, Mary Jo asked Lee to assign her to what was then a risky-writers circle and, while she remained active in writing-ecircle 2, she also joined Nancy writing-ecircle 9 where she began to share some of her darker stories. She recalls, “As Nancy and my circle members once again supported my writing, I came to understand how important it is to speak the truths of our lives.”

Mary Jo says it was a natural progression from there to become interested in facilitating an online writing circle. In 2003, when writing-ecircle 7 needed a new leader, she told Lee she

was interested and then embarked upon what she describes as an “incredible experience” with the women in that circle that continues to this day. The following year, in 2004, Marie Buckley resigned as editor of SCN Journal’s True Words column and Mary Jo held her breath and took an even bigger plunge. Deeply drawn to the work, she applied and was hired.

“Jane Ross (the SCN Journal Editor at the time) was a simply wonderful mentor with whom I loved working, as I do with Robin Wittig today,” says Mary Jo.

In 2007, Mary Jo edited the *True Words Anthology* and her story and recipe, “Breakfast Cheesecake,” was published in the SCN book, *Kitchen Table Stories*. In the same year, she began writing book reviews for the SCN book review site. The following year, she became an editor with SCN Editorial Services. Over the past seven years, three of her stories were chosen as SCN “Story of the Month.” In addition to publishing with SCN, she has had several freelance stories published in newspapers and periodicals.

“Early on, my stories were both heard and honored by women here at SCN and I have grown immensely in this cyberspace place and found my writing voice,” says Mary Jo. Essentially, because that gift has been given to me, I now find the deepest pleasure in both sharing and honoring the voices and the stories of all women who send in their stories to both online writing circle 7 and to *True Words from Real Women* for the quarterly Journal.”

As an editor, she tries to find and emphasize the strengths of a writer’s work and then offers thoughts about ways the piece might be improved, if needed. She learned this from her own experience when an editor essentially ripped one of her stories apart.

“Much of what she said held credence, yet I determined right then that her style would never be my editing style,” she recalls.

Looking to the future and what she can accomplish for SCN, Mary Jo hopes to continue to nurture SCN writers as she has been nurtured. “There are so many gifts to give and receive when we connect in this wonderful organization,” she says. “I seek always to give each woman with whom I come in contact what I have been given by SCN in so many different ways.”

In addition to helping others find their writing voice, Mary Jo is working on two memoirs of her own. One is about an especially happy time in her life, describing her transformation from a city girl to a farm wife; the other is about the profoundly difficult time that propelled her into writing again. She also recently started a singular journal about a new unfolding part of her life that she says may well transform into a book before the other two do.

“Sometimes I just have to walk away from the difficult one for awhile and then go back to the other. And sometimes I just have to leave them both,” she says. “I tend to follow the pleadings of my heart with my writing, believing there’s excellent guidance there.”

When she is not reading or writing or working for SCN, Mary Jo finds many ways to express her creativity through

gardening, cooking, sewing, knitting, and quilting. She also loves to spend time with her three children that she says are “wonderful, talented individuals with incredibly generous hearts.” Her son, Chip, is an electrician with a broad range of skills and recently got engaged. Her daughter, Polly, is an editor for the online newspaper, *newser.com*. Her youngest daughter, Susan, recently returned to college in Florida to major in biology and environmental engineering.

During the past year her daughter, Polly, got her real estate license and sold her first home to Mary Jo. Although she was not quite ready to retire, she knew she wanted to live in that tiny, eclectic town in Albemarle County, Virginia, near Charlottesville and went to look at it the day after Polly told her about it.

“I knew after being there for seven minutes that it was home,” says Mary Jo, who admits that life is a little crazy right now living four days a week at one home, where she is winding down her career at the Rockbridge Area Free Clinic, and then traveling across two counties to spend the other three days setting up her new house. But Mary Jo enjoys the wonderful, creative momentum that unfolds as she creates and transforms her new home into her own space for the next chapter of her writing life.

“Have I mentioned how very good life is?” she asks with a twinkle in her eye.

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## Great Gifts for Yourself...or Someone Else

**Story Circle Network has a new online store!  
Choose from a number of products with the Story Circle  
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about women. Browse the store and buy anything you  
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## A Conversation With Betty Auchard

by Lisa Shirah-Hiers

Betty Auchard's initiation into the writing life began after her husband of nearly 49 years died of cancer. A retired art teacher, she found herself turning to writing to cope with her grief. Her memoir about that experience, *Dancing in My Nightgown: The Rhythms of Widowhood*, won the Independent Publisher Book Award (IPPY). Her newly released memoir, *The Home for the Friendless*, explores her unusual childhood growing up in a series of temporary homes during the Great Depression. She has published stories and essays in *San Jose Mercury News*, *Today's Senior*, and the *Chocolate for a Woman's Soul* series. A recent SCN member, she is also a gifted speaker known for her upbeat, lively and humorous presentations. Lisa Shirah-Hiers interviewed her for the SCJ.

**SCJ:** In *Dancing*, you talk about why you began writing immediately after your husband's death. Tell me what you discovered about writing and the healing process.

**BA:** I discovered that paper was my best friend. Grievers must be allowed to talk, and there wasn't always someone to listen, so I talked to paper. I had no idea that writing about my strange new, sad and funny life as a widow was my tool for healing. My counselor still uses my stories for his grief support groups. I realized I liked reading my own stories, and so did my friends. I couldn't stop recording the events of my life and the people who caused them, and I saw stories everywhere. It was like going fishing in a well-populated fish place; a lot of them just got away.

**SCJ:** What was the greatest shock or surprise about life as a single person?

**BA:** Everything; first of all, I had to learn how to do all of the guy jobs that Denny took care of: how to put gas in the car, how to pay the bills, income taxes, driving on the freeway, remembering to put out the trash once a week, how to turn off the gas in the house, how to turn off the water in the house, how to find good people to mow, clean the rain gutters, fix the car...the list was endless. I was always out of my comfort zone. Daily, the only thing on my mind was "What have I forgotten?" I kept a list of important things to do and could never remember where the list was.

**SCJ:** Why do you think your "muse" moved from painting to writing following your husband's death?

**BA:** Well, neither of those things was new to me. I drew pictures all my life and was called the family artist before I was five. I also love to talk, and to me, talking is akin to writing. All the arts have a huge amount in common. Only the terminology is different.

**SCJ:** How would you describe your writing process? Do you have any special rituals?

**BA:** You mean like writing all the time instead of dressing, doing dishes, or brushing my teeth? I need to divorce my keyboard for the sake of my physical well-being. My body is shaped like a computer chair and it's ruining my posture.

**SCJ:** I was struck in reading both memoirs that as a high school student you never danced because it was forbidden in your church, but that became a passion in your adult life. How did this transformation take place?

**BA:** First of all, rhythm was always in my bones. My family was musical, so dancing was just lying dormant in my muscle memory.... Denny came from the same kind of background, so when we dated in Denver, Colorado the summer of 1949, we were bold enough to go dancing at Elitch Gardens in Denver. Neither of us knew how to dance, so we just made it up as we went along. The only difference was that I led and Denny followed, but neither of us realized that until years later. A year or two after he died, I started dancing to music on the radio alone in my nightgown each morning while the coffee was brewing. I can't possibly explain the good effect it had on me. It lifted me up, and I felt joyous. Maybe getting my blood circulating like that did a number on my brain.

**SCJ:** At what point did you decide to publish *Dancing*?

**BA:** In 1999 I met a woman in an online writing class who eventually became my own personal editor. Sandi Corbitt-Sears edited my stories before I submitted them to the *Chocolate for a Woman's Soul* series (Simon & Schuster). Then, early in 2000 I decided to sign up for my first writing conference, East of Eden in Salinas, CA. It was there that one of my instructors, Bruce McAllister from S. CA, read 30 pages of my "widow" stories and assured me that they were publishable. Bruce helped me with query letters, etc., but the agents I contacted said that they didn't take memoirists as clients, and suggested I go directly to a small press publisher because they work directly with authors. Bruce helped me to find Stephens Press because he was presenting manuscripts from three of his clients. Mine was the only clean manuscript ready to go so it was chosen.

**SCJ:** How is a small press publisher different from self publishing or the big publishing houses?

**BA:** Most people don't know that many independent publishers share the cost of publication with the author. It is several notches up from self-publishing, especially Stephens Press, because they have an excellent staff on board as well as a talented book designer. I had to find out how to access money to finance my part of the project; I learned about home equity loans.

**SCJ:** Let's talk about your latest book, *Home for the Friendless*. The book chronicles your unusual childhood growing up in a series of temporary homes during the Great Depression. What do you think that experience taught you?

**BA:** Without a doubt, my siblings and I got used to adjusting to change and learned how to adapt to new surroundings easily.

**SCJ:** What helped you survive your childhood?

**BA:** I admit that it wasn't always peachy keen for sure. My brother, sister, and I had slightly wacky parents but they were also creative and loving. Our parents were musical and sang and played several instruments. We three kids inherited those qualities and that helped us pass the time in so many different living arrangements. We loved the radio and the movies. We acted out plays. We harmonized when we were supposed to be doing dishes. We built forts, and created a museum in an old shed. We read comic books and traded them with other kids. We rarely checked books out of a library because it was too hard to get there. We drew pictures and created a play store in the basement and had a blast playing Indian in a corn stalk tepee that Dad made. After the war started in 1941, we played war in the garden by using gourds for hand grenades. We were never at a loss for something to do.

**SCJ:** As a child you were often left to supervise your younger siblings. What effect did that have on you?

**BA:** It was sometimes more than I could handle. I was 11 and 12 when it was hardest, but it was my job and I did it. I lacked the maturity and skill to do it right. Bob was easy, but my sister, Patty, was a red-headed spit fire. Whenever she refused to cooperate, I just whacked her or squeezed my short fingernails into her arm until the skin wanted to bleed but didn't. She never tattled because she knew that Mom would do worse. Mom would've whipped her legs with a switch from the tree for giving me so much trouble. Dad never laid a hand on us, ever. By the time I was 13 and Patty was 8, my sister was becoming civilized.

**SCJ:** If you could go back in time and talk to your younger self, what advice would you give her?

**BA:** I would tell my young self to brush my teeth longer than thirty seconds and to wash my arms in between baths and to scrub my elbows. We bathed in a tin tub once a week and I remember how grungy my elbows got. If I could, I would also tell my young self not to get so mad at Patty.

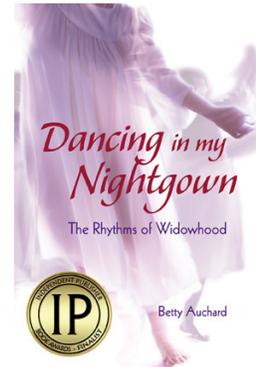
**SCJ:** What is your favorite story in *Friendless*?

**BA:** I just *knew* you were going to ask. I've wracked my brain to decide which one I like best, and it's usually whatever I just finished reading. However, three stories stand out: "Betty to the Rescue," "Toothpaste Candy," and "The F Word on the Daniels Park Pavilion."

**SCJ:** I loved "Betty to the Rescue" too! This is the incident when you were four and had to watch your baby brother while your parents had one of many fights. When he fell out of a second story window your mother fainted and while your father was trying to revive her you found your brother crying, but safe and sound. I read this story to my daughter who howled when we read: "I stepped over my mother and dashed behind the house, eager to see what he looked like all flattened and squashed." We loved that story because it's told from a four-year old's perspective. You were a spunky little kid!

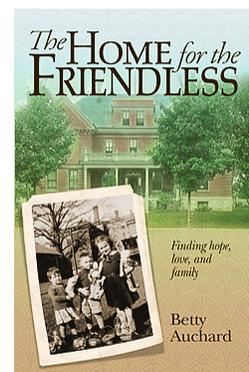
**SCJ:** What do you hope readers will take away from your books?

**BA:** That it's possible for anyone to have their first book published when they are seventy-five and to have another one published when they are eighty. Also that life is too good to waste on being angry or feeling sorry for ourselves. Just hang on by your fingertips and don't let go.



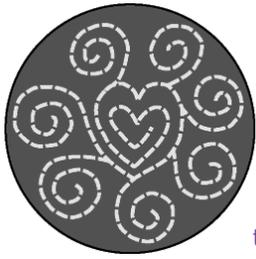
*"The fact that I can do anything that I want because I'm a widow sounds good to some women, but it has its drawbacks. First of all, I'm now a person run amuck, with an unorthodox schedule. I eat cookies with cold milk when I'm hungry, write until sunup, and sleep when I get tired. When in a marathon writing mode I don't get dressed. When the day is over, I just put on a different nightgown...." P 106*

Read the review at :  
[www.storycirclebookreviews.org/reviews/nightgown.shtml](http://www.storycirclebookreviews.org/reviews/nightgown.shtml)



*"Winning the election made me realize I could do pretty much anything I set my mind to. Head Girl was only the beginning. If I wanted, I could become an actress, an artist, a teacher, a mother...or even a writer. The future was mine." p 327*

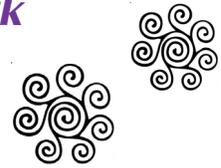
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## Circles: The Heart of Story Circle Network

# The Power of Circles

by Barbara Miller



A Story Circle is a group of women who come together to read, write, and celebrate the stories of their lives. A Circle may be made up of as few as two or three people, or as many as twenty. Each meeting of your Circle will probably include a period of writing, a time for voluntary reading, and discussion. Some Circles have chosen to share a meal or refreshments before they settle down to writing and reading. One group has even organized an optional yoga session and a period of meditation.

What is there about gathering in a circle that makes the experience life-giving, trust building and empowering? Christina Baldwin, who will lead the March, 2011 Lifelines Retreat for Story Circle Network, has written extensively about the power of the circle in her book entitled *Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture*. Places for openness, honesty, and vulnerability, our story circles live out the possibilities found in Baldwin's text. A current example of circle work comes from SCN member Janet Lucy, writer, writing circle facilitator and creative muse from Santa Barbara, California. She shares her own experience below.

What calls a woman to a weekly writing circle? In the beginning, my intention was to facilitate women's spiritual self-discovery groups for healing and transformation. I had experienced the power of writing during my own personal exploration, and so I offered it as the "power tool" in my groups. Pretty soon, I was calling them "writing groups" and women came out of the woodwork. So many women wanted to write!

That was almost twelve years ago, and I have been facilitating three groups of six women each week ever since. I offer the groups seasonally, so the focus or membership may shift from one season to another. I have facilitated memoir groups, dream writers' circles, a "novel approach" for creative nonfiction, personal essay writing workshops, the heroine's journey, and a writing group facilitator's training. This fall I am focusing on the relationship between moon phases and the creative process, and each woman has a writing project to reflect this process. Intriguing!

I believe the key to the success of these groups is our process. During the two and half hours of each meeting, we write together from seasonal themes and prompts, tapping a universal energy and expressing it uniquely. We listen, witness, and reflect back what we hear. We rarely edit or offer feedback unless it is specifically asked for in order to polish a piece for submission, though publication is not the main focus of our writing. Our primary intention is connection and authenticity, and the groups are based on unconditional acceptance, respect and support. I feel that Brenda Ueland's words are a perfect reflection of what happens in these writing groups:

*Everybody is talented, original, and has something important to say. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand. Ideas actually begin to grow within us and come to life.*

—Brenda Ueland

*If You Want to Write: A Book about Art, Independence and Spirit*

SCN now has 53 story circles. If you cannot find a circle in your area, we encourage you to start a writing circle yourself. Information for beginning a circle can be found on the SCN webpage where you will also find access to the "Guide for Facilitators." Barbara Miller, and many others, stand ready to assist you in all possible ways. Contact her at [circles@storycircle.org](mailto:circles@storycircle.org).



## SCN Sugar Bowl Scholarships

Story Circle Network empowers women to tell their stories, discover their identities through their stories and choose to be the authors of their own lives. We're in our 13th year of helping women find their voices. Sugar Bowl Scholarships help our members in need pay their annual dues and participate in some of our programs.

Why not become a contributor to this worthwhile program? To add your contribution to our Sugar Bowl Scholarship Fund, send a check to: Sugar Bowl, Story Circle Network, PO Box 500127, Austin, TX 78750-0127. You may also donate on the SCN website at [www.storycircle.org/frmdonate.shtml](http://www.storycircle.org/frmdonate.shtml).

*I love people. I love my family, my children . . . but inside myself is a place where I live all alone and that's where you renew your springs that never dry up.*

—Pearl S. Buck



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- \_\_\_\_\_ USA: \$45
- \_\_\_\_\_ Canada & Mexico: \$55 (International MO)
- \_\_\_\_\_ International \$60 (International MO)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Internet Chapter: \$20/yr (in addition to your national dues)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Sample copy of the *Story Circle Journal*: \$5

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

- \$75 Friend
- \$125 Supporter
- \$225 Sustainer
- \$400+ Benefactor
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- \$175 Contributor
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## Join Christina Baldwin for SCN's Lifelines Retreat March 4-6, 2011

by Lisa Shirah-Hiers

What if we really talked with each other, and listened to each other, and held each others' stories as sacred information that could transform our lives?

What if we learned to shape the stories of our lives as containers for our experience and an expression of our heart's greatest desires?

What if we wrote what we had learned and took it home with us as a guide to realizing our dreams and hopes? Writing our past in the present can be a life line to a future filled with hope.

Make plans now to come to Texas March 4-6, 2011 for our women-only Lifelines Retreat at Festival Hill in Round Top, Texas. Located 75 miles east of Austin, the International Festival-Institute was founded in 1972 by world-renowned concert pianist James Dick and has developed superb year round education and performance programs. In your off-time you can enjoy their unique 200-acre campus including their extensive gardens, parks and nature preserves.

Our 2011 retreat will be facilitated by SCN member Christina Baldwin, whose book, *Life's Companion: Journal Writing as a Spiritual Practice*, has been the basis of many of our journaling classes. Christina graduated from Macalester College with honors in English and from Columbia Pacific University with a master's degree in Educational Psychology. In addition to *Life's Companion*, she is the author of *Calling the Circle: the First and Future Culture*; *The Seven Whispers: A Spiritual Practice for Times Like These*; and *Storycatcher*:

*Making Sense of our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story*. A coveted speaker and workshop presenter, she is the co-founder (with Ann Linnea) of PeerSpirit, Inc. (<http://peerspirit.com>). Find out more on her website: [http://storycatcher.net/christina\\_baldwin.html](http://storycatcher.net/christina_baldwin.html)

The all-inclusive fee covers triple occupancy room for Friday and Saturday night, 5 meals and drinks/snacks during breaks.\* Early bird registration fees are \$400 for SCN members, and \$435 for non-members. After December 31<sup>st</sup> the price goes up to \$425 for members and \$460 for nonmembers. (Non-member prices include a one-year SCN membership.) Space is limited, so register early! For info or to register visit: <http://www.storycircle.org/LifeLines/>

\* Single-occupancy rooms are an additional \$25 per night. Participants can arrange to stay Sunday night as well, at an additional \$62 for triple occupancy or \$85 single.

Story Circle Network, Inc.  
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## 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** and your poems are **30 lines** or less. We may edit your submissions for grammar and spelling. Members only please. Here are the topics and deadlines for 2011:

**March (due Jan. 15)—*It Started as an Ordinary Day***

**June (due April 15)—*Gratitude***

**September (due July 15)—*Change of Direction***

**December (due October 15)—*Holiday Stories***

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: [maryjo\\_d@yahoo.com](mailto: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.



## Time to Renew?

Check the expiration date on your mailing label, or check online at <http://www.storycircle.org/members/expire.php> Go to [www.storycircle.org](http://www.storycircle.org) and use your credit card or PayPal account to renew immediately.

### Member Benefits:

- Receive the quarterly *Journal*, and contribute your work.
- Join the members-only *SCN LifeWriters Group*.
- Feature & promote your work online and in our national eletters.
- Enter your work in our annual LifeWriting Contest.
- Attend our wonderful events.
- And best of all; join our circle of sisters and share your stories.

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



Visit the *Story Circle Network Blog*

**Telling Herstories:**

***The Broad View***

***And Now...One Woman's Day***

<http://storyclerenetwork.wordpress.com/>