

## Stories from the Heart V



There is a lot of blogging, tweeting, chatting, and emailing going on following SCN's highly successful Stories from the Heart V Conference, held in early February in Austin, Texas. Attended by 172 women from all over the country, the conference offered the chance to learn, experience, inspire, and be inspired through the shared *stories from the heart*. In this issue of the Journal, we share testimonials, photos, and memories of the conference.

*"There was a lot of soul shaking going on at the conference in so many great ways—with many wonderful presentations, techniques, and deep heartfelt connections made. I made several new friends, and even got some new writing done! Most of all, I experienced the great group energy and that enlivens us and provides us with new possibilities. I'm planting all those little seeds now that began just last week, and I know the garden is going to be beautiful."*

~Excerpt from Linda Joy Myers' entry, "Soul Shaking" at the Story Circle Conference, posted on Story Circle's blog, Telling HerStories: The Broad View



Lisa Shirah-Heirs opens Stories from the Heart V with moving comments about the power of circles. Read her remarks on page 6.

### When we asked "What will you remember most about the conference?" you said:

- ♥ I will remember the warmth of everyone involved, the enthusiasm, the respect and the love that emanated from everyone.
- ♥ The positive vibes and supportive atmosphere. Confidentiality seems to be valued here.
- ♥ The pre-conference activities: the Friday morning coaching sessions and the Friday afternoon workshop.
- ♥ The keynote speaker, Heather Cariou, and the charming, talented women I've met this weekend.
- ♥ Meeting other women writers.
- ♥ The variety of offerings and the opportunity for interaction in the workshops.
- ♥ Great spirit, great women!
- ♥ Amazing group of women and the support each gives to the other, both in terms of writing and their individual journeys.
- ♥ Loved the auction.
- ♥ I can't believe the quality of my writing that came out in these sessions!
- ♥ Will always remember the variety of women and the power, strength, and beauty of their personalities.



### In This Issue . . .

President's Letter.....2  
 Online Learning..... 3  
 Stories from the Heart V—Memories . .4-5  
 Circles: The Heart of SCN.....6  
 How I Discovered SCN.....7  
 SCN Lifewriter's Group.....7  
 Take A Bow.....8-9  
 True Words.....10-19  
 Interview With Peggy Tabor Millen.....20-21  
 Kitchen Table Stories.....22  
 SCN Book Reviews.....23

Members only—view the color, online version of the *Journal* at:  
<http://www.storycircle.org/members/pdfs/scjournal.pdf>

## Letter From SCN's President—



## To See and Be Seen

We are flying high on the good vibes fanning out into the universe from our Stories from the Heart V conference this past February. One hundred seventy-five women, all in one place, all at one time, honoring their own and each other's stories, laughing together, crying together. It was my fourth SCN conference, my third as a board member, and my first as SCN President. Though I was one of the busy organizers, running around solving the usual kinds of emergencies and making sure all was running smoothly, I was fed as I always am by the amazing energy and spirit of

women. We are awesome. We are *noticers*. We *see*. We see when someone is under stress, when someone needs to talk, when someone needs someone to hold open a door, or carry a box, or set a table. So no matter how busy we behind-the-scenes gals may have felt, we were never worried and we were never alone. Because we knew someone would *notice*; someone would *see*.

In the popular movie, *Avatar*, the indigenous population of the planet Pandora uses the greeting "I see you" to mean not only physically seeing the person across from them but seeing them in a deeper way that includes knowing their heart, their inner being, acknowledging their uniqueness, their value to the community. A story circle does all these things. In the circle we can tell stories we may never have had the courage to share before. Telling our stories in the sacred space of the circle, we uncover new meanings to the events of our lives and how those events have shaped us and the people around us. We are validated—literally, given value—by our circle members who listen without judging, hear the pain and joy, the struggle and triumph behind the story, and honor us because they can relate. No matter how far apart our age or experience, no matter how far away we may live from one another, we share the experience of being a woman, a female human being having female-human-being experiences.

Books and movies like *Avatar*, *Star Wars*, and *Harry Potter* appeal to us in the same way our individual stories do—they are both universal and particular. We relate to the characters in the story, to the women in our circle, because we have "been there, done that." At the same time we are inspired by the unique wisdom and bravery of the heroes and heroines.

If you are living life with any kind of awareness, then you understand that you are the heroine in your own life. SCN can help you bring that awareness to the forefront of your consciousness, the place where you can make sense of your experiences and decide if, when, what and how you want to change. There is incredible power in this kind of awareness. So when SCN says we strive to become "the authors of our own lives," we aren't talking just about writing. We are talking about autonomy, personal power, strength, courage. This is what the circle gives us—power to change ourselves; power to change our relationships; power to change the world we live in. In the circle I *see* you, and you *see* me too.

-Lisa Shirah-Hiers

## Story Circle Network's Mission

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

## Story Circle Journal

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

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**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.



## Online Learning Helping Women Write Their Lives

If you've been thinking about collecting some family stories, getting back into writing after an absence from it, starting a regular journal project, or experimenting with poetry, we have just the right class for you!

The Story Circle Network has been offering classes, workshops, conferences, writing and reading circles, and online programs—all designed for women—for more than a decade. Our central program focus is writing about our lives. We have offered courses and educational programs (both as workshops and online classes) in memoir, reminiscence, journaling, poetry, family stories, kitchen table stories, writing-as-healing, place writing and nature writing, writing for personal growth and spiritual development, and poetry. We teach general writing skills, organization, and critical editing, as well as technical skills in book design and development, online marketing, blogging, and other Internet-related activities. And we do it all online, so you can work at home, from your computer, and not have to attend classes. Here is a sampling of the courses we are listing for our March-to-May term. You'll find more about each of these classes and the others we are currently offering on our website: [www.storycircleonlineclasses.org](http://www.storycircleonlineclasses.org).

### Introduction to Writing Family History taught by Mary Murphy

Mary writes: In this five-unit course, we will take those first steps and explore the many sources of information available to us when we write a family history. Each week, we will discuss a new source of information about a family's history—photos, words, kitchens, belongings—as well as where to look for that information and how to “read” it. Then we will write a short (500-1000 words) episode of the family story.

A Canadian, A. Mary Murphy is a lifelong writer whose doctoral work was in life writing. Her group biography of her mother's family, *Pierce: Six Prairie Lives*, is forthcoming from Temeron Press. Her poetry collection, *Shattered Fanatics*, was published by Buschek Books in 2007

### How to Revise and Edit Your Writing Part 1: The Big Picture, Part 2: Polishing Your Story taught by Amber Starfire

Amber asks: “Do you find it difficult to edit your own writing, or worry about punctuation and grammatical errors?” Whether you're writing for yourself, your family, or a broader audience, you want your writing to be the best it can be—especially if you intend to publish. This two-part course, designed especially for lifewriters, will help you hone your revision skills. In “The Big Picture” (Part 1) you will gain clarity on the purpose of your writing, improve the structure and organization of your stories, and create strong paragraphs that will keep your readers' attention. In “Polishing Your Story” (Part 2) you will learn how to cut the unnecessary, edit for consistency, punctuation and grammar, and prepare your story for submittal and publication. (You may take either part without taking the other.)

Amber Starfire is publisher and editor of *The Writer's Eye* Magazine, freelance editor, writer, and photographer. She earned her masters degree at Stanford University and has taught at community colleges and businesses for twenty years. She is the editor of SCN's annual anthology.

### Writing Alchemy: Quick-Start Method taught by Matilda Butler & Kendra Bonnett

Writing Alchemy: Quick-Start Method begins with the five key elements of writing and learning to use them effectively. Our Quick-Start Deconstruction Exercise helps you peel away the individual story elements and begin using the Writing Alchemy technique immediately. Then, with all the elements standing ready, we'll show you how to construct an authentic story—more intimate, more compelling and better able to engage your readers. Your instructors will use conference calls, writing exercises, and feedback to help you build a powerful vignette.

### Celebrate Your Journey: A Journal Writing Workshop taught by Dawn Espelage

Dawn tells us that her class is “designed to enhance sense of self and worth, clarify values, honor life's blessings and write the future you want.” Participants will explore, re-define and envision their journeys through the use of writing exercises such as Passageways, Treasure Chest, Anchors, Snapshot, Journey Map and Inner Compass. Journaling prompts will guide the participant in self-discovery, creativity, acceptance and moving forward. All participants will receive a free copy of the journal writing workbook *Life Lines: Celebrate Your Journey*.

Dawn is a Certified Journal Instructor through The Center of Journal Therapy and has worked in the social work field for 13 years. She has written two journal-writing workbooks, *Life Lines: Celebrate Your Journey* and *Celebrate Your Journey: Monthly Planner and Journal Companion*. She was a presenter at *Stories From the Heart V*.

*In addition to these classes, SCN is offering more courses on memoir writing, journaling and dreaming, poetry, and finding a voice. Our faculty members, all women, are experienced teachers and published writers with a special interest in helping women explore their lives.*

# Stories from the Heart V

## Memories



I found the coaching sessions to be inspirational, although once I had my "assignment" I was terrified about speaking with a real author. Each of my coaches immediately put me at ease & managed to interpret my ill-composed questions. I hope this opportunity is repeated at the next conference.



I can't begin to tell you how much I enjoyed the conference. My head is still swirling with all the information. I went there not knowing anyone "in person" and I came away now able to put faces to names plus meeting many more women I'll never forget.



I have rarely (if ever) been to a conference of any kind (and I have been to a lot) where I did not encounter one or more "dud" sessions. Every session I attended in Austin was fantastic—not a dud among them.





It was a lovely, splendid, exhausting time. Exhausting emotionally, physically, and psychologically! I learned an incredible amount of info: writing about difficult memories, how to pump things up with details, story structure, and on and on. The best part was meeting women that I knew from "online". I have never been with such a group of warm, accepting, affirming women—ever! Start saving your pennies for the 1012 conference. It's quite wonderful!

~ Caroline



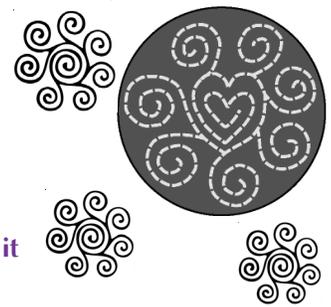
Our final speaker was an Austin woman named Mary Gordon Spence, and she was just a hoot and a half! She told us a story about being on the john in a restaurant down in Mexico. She was just a-singin' away, as was her habit, when suddenly a voice in the next stall called, "Mary Gordon, is that you?" Turns out it was one of her cousins. Neither even knew the other was in Mexico, and if she hadn't been singing, they might have missed each other completely! ~ From Becky Lane's blog, *Seasonality: The Common Sense Guide to Living the Good Life*

# Circles: The Heart of Story Circle Network

## We Are A Circle!

by Lisa Shirah-Hiers

Ordinarily this column is about one of our forty-plus small circles. But as I contemplated what to say at our conference opening remarks it occurred to me that SCN itself is a circle, albeit a very large one. One thought led to another until I had to leap out of bed and write it all down if I ever wanted to drop off to sleep. So, here, slightly edited, are the thoughts I expressed about circles at our Stories from the Heart conference



“Isn’t SCN something special? If you have attended a Stories from the Heart Conference, or Writing from Life, or if you’re in a circle, you already know that. But if this is your first time, if you’ve been getting the journal but never been to our events before, or if this conference is the first time you’ve had any connection with SCN, I predict that you will simply be blown away by what we are, by what we do. Because what we are—all of us in this room—is a circle. What is a circle? Well, for one thing, it’s round. And round, it turns out, is very, very strong.

In Tai Chi we round our arms because that way we can better withstand an attack. If you lock your arm or your wrist when an opponent comes at you, the bone will break. But a round arm absorbs the shock. I tell my little piano students to keep their knuckles rounded when they strike the key, because round is strong. A rounded finger can take the stress of pounding away for hours a day on some of the smallest joints in the body.

The Romans understood the strength of the circle when they discovered the arch. The curve of the arch distributes the stress in a way that makes it better able to withstand the force of gravity. So we see that roundness, the circle, is inherently strong.

A circle is also egalitarian. We circle around a campfire, because in this way, we are all equidistant from the heat. If we “squared” around the fire, the folks in the corners would be cold. King Arthur’s table was round so that all the knights would have the same status, sharing the power and prestige equally.

Circles are protective. The pioneers circled the wagons when they were under attack, so they could keep the most vulnerable safe in the middle, just as the womb encircles the unborn baby and keeps it safe and protected.

The circle is feminine. Women understand it on a very deep level. We gather, we encircle the one who is crying, the one who is ill, or giving birth, or dying. We understand the power of the circle, of coming together, the wisdom of sharing, the necessity of connection, the strength in softness, in curves, in arches, in roundness. That deep, unconscious archetype is part of our feminine heritage, our collective memory. It is the source of our unique strength.

Perhaps for these reasons, the very idea of the story circle resonates so deeply with every woman I’ve ever spoken to. For not only circles but stories are our domain, too. In the old wive’s tales, the fairy stories collected by the brothers Grimm and others, the favorite family stories about Uncle David and Aunt Sheryl

stranded in the snow, or how Great-Great-Grandma and Grandpa met, we hold the precious memory of the ancestors, we hold the myths, both universal and particular, the truths that make us who we are, that give each of our families its own history, its own culture, and which, at the same time, unite us in a common bond of understanding.

Drop a stone in the water, and the rings it gives birth to will ripple outward far beyond your ability to see them. The Story Circle Network is like that, and every member is like the stone that sets the water quivering. We are a circle, we in this room, we members of SCN, and every woman who has ever participated in anything we’ve ever done. We are a circle, where stories are the arch that spans the distance between us. We are a circle which gives equal honor to all, shares power and prestige and resources, allows each member to reach the warm source of heat and life in the center. We are round and we are strong. We are just what we say we are: a network, an interconnecting web of relationship and memory. Every Story Circle conference has been a circle of women—a circle containing smaller, interconnecting circles. And every Writing From Life workshop, every Lifelines retreat, every gathering of the SCN in every time, in every place. We are each like the stone dropped in the pond, which sets the circles spinning, rippling far beyond us, changing us, changing the world we live in. In the safety of the circle we give birth to new words, new worlds, we give birth to ourselves. For we are a circle, a Story Circle. And that is a powerful, magical thing.”

The SCN now boasts 47 Story Circles in the US, Canada and Yemen. If you would like to join a story circle in your area, check our “Story Circles Around the World” listing on the website. You’ll find it under the “What We Do” tab. Facilitators and journalers alike can also make good use of SCN’s *Starting Points: Weekly Writing Prompts for Women with Stories to Tell*. This wonderful collection features the best prompts of SCN Founder, Susan Wittig Albert’s popular Women’s Wise Words weekly email series. It’s available directly from the publisher, Lulu, at [www.lulu.com/content/774054](http://www.lulu.com/content/774054). A hard copy is just \$8.00 plus shipping and handling, or download for just \$5.00!

If you are a SCN facilitator who would like to have your circle featured in our column, or someone with general questions about circles, please contact the Circles Co-Coordinators Sharon Blumberg and Lisa Shirah-Hiers at [circles@storycircle.org](mailto:circles@storycircle.org).

# How I Discovered SCN

by Susan Ideus, Magnolia, TX

I am passionate about writing. I write whenever I can, and sometimes when I shouldn't. Thoughts at work are jotted down on a scrap of paper. Dining with friends, notes end up on napkins. At church, that week's bulletin becomes my tablet. I even read about writing in "how to" books and magazines. It was in one of those magazines that an ad about SCN caught my eye. I found the website and came upon a familiar name—Susan Wittig Albert. Whoa! She was the author of one of my books, *Writing from Life*. Plus this was a group just for women and it was accessible on the Internet. It seemed to be too good to be true. I joined in March of 2005, and I have never regretted it. I was assigned to a most wonderful e-writing circle and the e-reading circle.

Previously, my passion had always been tempered by fear. For a long time, I called it by other names: too busy to write when my girls were babies, too distracted when I'd get home from a difficult day at work, with an empty nest, "too selfish" to go off and write, leaving my husband to fend for himself. If there was a reason for me not to write, then I wouldn't ever fail at writing. However, I find not trying just as bitter a pill to swallow.

SCN has given me a sweeter glimpse of a writing life. I've stopped making excuses and started making time. The first time I sent a story to my writing circle, it was scary but also exciting. Exciting won and I've never looked back! I've done more writing more consistently: for my writing groups, for SCN sponsored classes and retreats, along with my regular journaling. I now give myself permission to spend time with my thoughts and ideas. I write because I need to, because I want to, and because I have something to say.

The biggest plus is being in contact with other women who share the same wants and needs and passions—and the same demon excuses. As the struggle is shared, I gain strength and confidence. I learn and I am challenged to learn even more. I write and I am encouraged to write more. I put away excuses as I meet gentle deadlines for submitting articles and for writing each month in my e-circles. My sisters in writing accept my offerings as they accept me. Here I am free to be me, to share my thoughts, to open my heart. Here I am safe. Here I am a writer.

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## SCN's Lifewriter's Group A Spot of Tea on the Internet

by Dani Greer

We've heard a lot about tea parties on the news lately, but I'll tell you, they aren't a bit like mine! I love a good tea party. In fact, I have a lovely cream tea every Saturday at 4 PM with or without company. I also have a spot of tea over the Internet and my friends at the Story Circle Network Lifewriters group, and that happens several times a day. I wouldn't miss that special connection for anything, rain or shine. Have you given it a try lately?

It's been a busy February at our 24/7 tea party, filled with anticipation and sharing about the Stories from the Heart Conference. You'll read more about that in other parts of this issue, so I'll only say how good it was to share stories with group members who were involved with the planning, their workshops, the auction items they donated, and finally, how much the experience meant to all of them. Quite a number of us were involved with the conference in some way, even if we didn't travel to Texas to participate.

Something wonderful happened after the conference on our Yahoo!Group. It was as though some cork popped in our discussions. They were always good, mind you, covering vast expanses of subject matter. But suddenly, our sharing reached a new depth. We talked about deeper heart issues. Memories that moved us deeply. Dreams of the perfect home. Why we never fit in growing up. How we wished we have been smarter in order to help

someone else through a tough time. What we could do to make the rest of our lives mean more. The stumbling blocks we faced. What tools were available to help us. The topics flowed from one subject to another as naturally as any conversation at a good tea party. Always the topics returned to our own writing, and I can't help but think these conversations contribute to what each of us brings to her journal every day.

Maybe you're not so good in groups? A little intimidated by joining a conversation? Well, don't be—because not only are we intelligent, interesting, experienced, and broad-minded, we are also very kind. To make it easy, we have several recurring theme days: Brazen Hussy Brags on Monday, Real Words Wednesday when we share our favorite quotations by women, and a Weekend Reading conversation that starts on Friday. If you don't want to share right off, at least enjoy some of the bounty offered by others in the group.

I've lately wondered how the women at the conference who don't have our daily sharing on-line are faring these weeks after the Austin gathering. Do you miss the connection with your kindred spirits? Well, don't for another second, because you can join us at any moment. Go to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/SCNLifewriters> and sign up! In a short while, Peggy Moody, our director and web mistress will let you through the door, and you can meet us, old friends and new, "over tea and the Internet."





## Take A Bow! Spotighting Our Volunteers Our New Board Members

by Robin A. Edgar

Story Circle Network board members volunteer their time and expertise to assist with programs and events such as the bi-annual conference, *Stories from the Heart*; *Writing from Life* workshops; *Online Classes*; *Be Our Guest* sessions and more. They collaborate to bring members opportunities such as the SCN Editorial Service and publications like the *Journal* and *Anthology*; the *Book Review* page and even life writing contests. Many hours are dedicated to membership support for circles and Internet chapters as well as the *Older Women's Legacy (OWL)* circle. All of these efforts enable the Story Circle Network to continue to reach out to women around the world so they can tell their stories, discover their identities through their stories, and choose to be the authors of their own lives.

We would like to introduce our new board members for 2010. They are vibrant, passionate writers who want to make a difference through our organization. We have been fortunate to have them in our Circles and now we are delighted to have them serve on the Story Circle Network board.

**Susan Ideus**  
Magnolia, Texas

A Story Circle Network member since 2006, Susan was attracted to the organization because she wanted a structure or incentive to write more regularly. She says Story Circle Network offered her a safe place to write and share. Susan contributes to the book review page and is member of an Internet reading circle and two e-writing circles. She says, "My Internet sisters are as close and welcoming as if they were right here."

A 62-year old married woman with two grown daughters, she was born in Indiana but grew up in New Mexico, where she earned a BA in Psychology from the University of New Mexico. She is looking forward to retirement and more time to write. "I'm just coming into my own in writing, I still have so much to say and I'm learning new ways and using new tools and tips all the time to do that."

Susan decided to join the Story Circle Network board with the hope of being a voice for those who love the organization, are aspiring to be more, and are looking for ways to express themselves and be heard. She says, "I'm kind of an 'everywoman', not an expert, not a teacher, not a published writer, or an editor." She would also like to see our reach expanded by word-of-mouth and with the new social networking we've been using. "I'd like to see the board members with social networking and marketing skills come up with innovative, inexpensive, dynamite ways to advertise our existence to the world."

Her goals for serving on the SCN board include helping to expand our reach through Internet and social networking. She would also like to see a grassroots effort to get the word out about Story Circle Network —notices in libraries, schools, hometown papers, etc. "Not everyone is connected to the Internet, although I admit that is changing. There have to be older folk, however, who would be a treasure trove of stories."

**Linda Thune**  
Austin, Texas

Linda's love of reading and writing and the opportunity to learn and receive encouragement from women writers attracted her to the Story Circle Network in 2002. As a member of OWL, she found support "for what I am and what I do" through the many writing opportunities (prompts) and learning opportunities from the *Be Our Guest* meetings to the stories in newsletter, to the many speakers.

Passionate about writing and reading, Linda went to school one class at a time, sometimes two, during 20 years of raising children and running a family. Receiving a BA at UT-Austin in English in 1997 and a Master's from Texas State in Literature in 2005, she currently teaches English composition at Austin Community College. Growing up the child of a Green Beret Linda is proud of her heritage. She says, although she looks African-American, her ancestry includes Native American and French. Linda represents a group of women whose voice is not often heard, African-American women and mothers of children with disabilities.

"I am working hard to find my voice, my place in a world that wants me or our children to be one race or another or have one focus or another. I believe in a human race that must see the world as one home with millions of members of the same family. I believe in embracing difference," Linda says.

Joining the Story Circle Network board to support a woman-focused organization, Linda hopes to reach out to diverse audiences such as low-income women and women with children who have a disability. She hopes to generate ideas for reaching a wider audience and write for the newsletters. She would also like to help expand the market for memoir writing; fiction with interesting women characters; and developing film projects that are woman-focused.

"The Story Circle Network lets women know they can have a voice and a connection to a place of their own and that any woman can start by writing her life."

## Rhonda Esakov

Georgetown, Texas

Rhonda joined the Story Circle Network 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.

Rhonda comes to the Story Circle Network Board with experience in providing research, training & tax support for various boards and organizations. She has also served on several committees to rewrite policies and apply for grants (and spend them wisely) and as Membership Chair for Business Women of America. Calling herself an "uber" volunteer, she describes herself as "a warm body with willing hands; not great at anything but good at many."

One of her 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'."

A member of E-circle #8 since 2009, Martha says she joined the Story Circle Network because it gives her inspiration as well as a venue in which to write, to share, to connect, and to learn. "I am attracted to the opportunity to connect to the invisible thread that hums when drawn tightly to other artists."

An author and facilitator of writing workshops for women, she organized and continues to facilitate a Creative Writing Group as well as a Prayer Shawl Ministry. Martha also writes and publishes a newsletter for women in her local church and is working on two children's books and toying with the idea of publishing a small book of poetry. She writes with two local groups in addition to E-circle #8 saying, "To me, writing is a bit like breathing—I must do it."

## Barbara Miller

Austin, Texas

Hearing about the Story Circle Network through a professional colleague, Barbara joined in 2005. Participating in writing and reading circles in Austin for three years and leading a writing circle for one year in Denton, Texas, she also attended a week-end writing workshop in Round Top, Texas and two national conferences, leading a workshop at the one in 2008. This past conference, she was on the committee that provided the "goodie bags" for participants.

A retired Director of Education for the Presbyterian Church (USA) for several congregations and at the regional levels of the Presbyterian Church, Barbara volunteers in church education. She says her membership in the Story Circle Network revived her interest in personal memoir and inspired her to pursue genealogy for family memoir writing. She has also made many friends and learned about women writers.

With skills in program development, organizational administration, teaching adults, working with women through group processes, and deep roots in spiritual formation, Barbara has served on many boards of nonprofit organizations as well as working with Boards of Trustees of several Presbyterian related colleges and universities. As a Story Circle Network board member, she says she wants to "give back" to the organization that has opened many doors for her, hoping to offer those opportunities to other women as well. During her three-year term on the Board, her primary goal is to give women from all walks of life the opportunity to tell their stories for personal edification and our corporate growth and meaning.

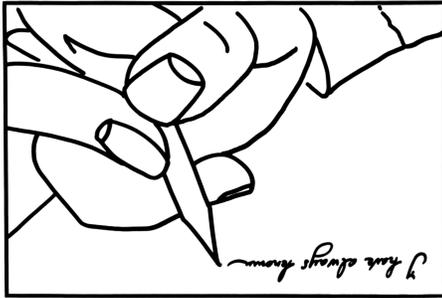
Barbara says, "I would like to see the Story Circle Network be much more aggressive in putting the word out about the organization. Each time I tell someone about the Story Circle Network they are amazed such a group exists and what to know more."

## Martha Bashore

San Antonio Texas

No stranger to the non-profit arena, Martha has served or worked on several boards because she believes it is important to give back and contribute to places from which you have received benefit. Besides being an artist, a poet, and workshop leader (and listener), she says she is an empathetic, friendly organizer and a multi-tasker. Her primary goals while serving on the Story Circle Network board are to reach more women who presently are not being reached, perhaps because they have not discovered their muse. She would also like to make classes more accessible to women during these depressed times.

Martha says, "The Story Circle Network gives voice to the creative spirit that lies within. It gives voice to some who have limited options to be heard. I would like to reach out to those who either have special needs or are caregivers of children with special needs."



## True Words from Real Women

# Dancing With Life

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 "Dancing With Life." Contribute your own True Words to the Journal. Future topics are listed on page 24.

### Solo

Judith Helburn, Austin TX

My 36-hour silent vigil and 24-hour food fast begins in a New Mexico wilderness. I sit by the pond just into Box Canyon Trail. Pond is alive with images, reflections from golden cottonwoods, edged by sage bushes releasing tangy scent as I brush by. Their pale leaves and branches grow out of knurly, twisted dark-gray trunks and roots.

Clouds fill the sky, moving and changing above and within the pond. Movement from wind and unseen beings create circles in the water which move out in widening ripples. Birds chirp, bees buzz. The cliffs and mesa come alive with reds, greens, and white in the sunlight. Then clouds change the colors to somber grays. Silence, then wind.

I am in the fall of my life. It is autumn here at Ghost Ranch. Magnificent rocks, cliffs, mesas, eons old, sage bushes. How old? Hundreds of years? Cottonwoods release their golden gowns. Change? Transformation? No anxiety, no concern. Change is.

We praise ancient beauty and damn our aging bodies. Do we not see the absurdity? We are part of the continuum.

The pond comes alive as I sit watching dozens of tadpoles, a blatant transformation symbol. Some water bug zooms into the school of tadpoles, leaving a wake, and, perhaps, fewer tadpoles. The pond and sky change as the sun rises to its zenith, hanging there for seemingly hours.

Standing at a sunny spot, I see mystery as wind moves the water, creating silvery pearlescent flashes of light. Diamonds move across the pond in clusters, brilliant, always in the middle, not at the beginning, nor the end. A dragonfly glides by.

We, too, shine and flash at the height of our lives. The midday is full of joy—exuberance!

I walk across the path. Huge boulders, many with memorial plaques. This is a place of remembering who was. What in me has gone? Impatience and judgment, I hope. What else?

The sun arches across the sky. The shadows grow longer and I look over my shoulder as the sun slips behind the mesa and I head back to camp.

### A Trepidation Experience

Shirley Burton, Santa Fe NM

Rising over the treetops, the sun faintly peeks a slice of pink here and a slice of orange there through my bathroom window. As I shower in the first light of morning, my thoughts turn to an experience in my adolescence.

I remember that summer hay ride in Robertson County, when boys and girls were planted on bales of hay in a wagon pulled by Brother Bennett's—pastor of the Methodist Church, our chaperone for the evening—truck. Several miles down a country lane, he circled the wagon in a clearing and we teenagers scattered into the woods. Bob Jones—football-player physique, tall, tanned, in jeans and white short-sleeved shirt, nattily cuffed—chased after me as my 13-year-old legs followed our friends into the brambles and bushes.

"Let's look for snipes," someone yelled.

It may have been the pastor for all I know. What did he do while pubescent youth scattered into remote areas? Perhaps that's another story.

Bob said, "Oh, we must have a paper bag for catching the snipes. Luckily, I have one in my back pocket."

Innocently, I said, "Let's go get 'em."

Quietly we hunched over and, with apprehension, called for snipes. We hunted deeper into the forest whispering, "Here snipe, here snipe."

Ten minutes passed without any rustling snipe sounds in the bag. Bored with an empty snipe bag and the distance it put between us, Bob suggested that we play the game, Twenty-One.

Starting with his hand, palm down, then my hand on top of his, we repeated the process, counting to twenty-one.

"My, my," I thought, "here we stand 'crossed-hands-tight' and almost nose-to-nose."

"We have to kiss," he said, "because my hand is on the bottom and yours on the top—that's the object of the game. Isn't this fun!"

With trepidation I puckered my lips to his.

## Okay, From the Top

Crystal Perez, Lockhart TX

Okay, from the top.

Two steps forward, and always five steps back. You let go, and I fall.

Let's try that again.

There's so much chemistry, yet our steps have problems matching our pace.

How many times have we danced this dance?

You spin me back and forth. Then it's smooth with the right steps.

Just when I think we've got it, you let go. And I fall again.

Practice makes perfect, it's said. I know this dance will be beautiful and perfect when we finally get it down.

So here we go again. Deep breath. Another try. Never giving up.

Take my hand. This time, don't let go.

## Dance of Possibility

Lorine Andresen, Forest Grove OR

The doctor stood at the foot of my six-year-old grandson's hospital bed. With his thumb and middle finger he flicked the bottom of his tiny foot.

"Wake up," he said, his loud, stern voice bringing no reaction except from the tired and worry-weary family that circled the bed. I could feel my husband's body tense and saw my daughter's tired, puffy eyes fill with tears. For nearly a week we'd been entangled in a sleepless nightmare of brain tumors and terror of the unknown. Now this previously soft-spoken neurosurgeon that tried to save him seemed arrogant and callous.

"Wake up," he said again, giving another flick to his foot. "Wake up, stick out your tongue." Only the monitors hooked to the various tubes, cords, wires, and gadgets in and on his tiny, naked body gave proof of life. The nurse and doctor exchanged a look that made our hearts sink. He turned to leave and then turned back again, giving one final flick and demand to wake up. Slowly a tiny tip of tongue appeared. Flashing a giant smile he ordered and got the tongue to come out a little further. With total abandon he grabbed the nurse, twirled her around in *do-si-do* fashion, laughing as he gave our daughter a big bear hug. Out the door he went, skipping, twirling, and hugging his way past the nurse's station and down the corridor.

We looked at each other through tears of joy. At that moment we didn't truly understand the significance of that little tongue movement, but the doctor's dance of life raised our spirits and gave us the hope we so desperately needed. Later he explained that the tumor was deeply embedded in the section of brain that controls ability to eat and swallow. Had that area been damaged during extraction of the tumor, a feeding tube would have been a permanent fact of life for our grandson.

This wonderful young doctor's skilled hands made life possible; his dance gave promise of life with possibility.

Brenton celebrated his 25th birthday in January, 2010.

## Butterflies Are Free

Marlene Taylor, Yonkers NY

I have been in recovery from clinical depression for a few years now. Writing my life story has become one way to return to the freedom of my childhood. I've written about the wonderful adventures that I used to have in our family garden.

I remember how I used to crouch down and watch ants slowly moving from one ant hill to the next, each carrying single grains of sand. I watched them for hours, trying to imagine what the inside of ant hills looked like.

I watched dragonflies up close and was frightened when I saw their large eyes. I enjoyed picking daisies for the dinner table.

My breath was often shortened from running after butterflies with a handmade net. I never caught one but if I had, I would have let her go. I just wanted to see a butterfly up close.

A large rock became my seat under the apple tree. I would wait there hoping the cardinal would return and sing her beautiful song again. One of my favorite pastimes was watching ladybugs crawl up and down blades of grass. I witnessed a stray cat tending her newborn kittens under the hydrangea bush. The sight and sound of hummingbirds in flight fascinated me.

My 10 year old eyes were blessed by my observance of the many facets of nature. I garnered much joy from writing those memories. Yes!

I have suffered from severe depression in my adult life but the process of writing my life story always reminds me that there have been and always will be days of genuine sunshine. There have been days when I felt free, light hearted and absolutely me. Life story writing empowers me with the ability to focus on the goodness and joy that so often fills my life. I consider my pen the ultimate meditation tool.

Butterflies are free and so am I. I am free to use all the gifts God gave me to renew my spirit and be a catalyst for my own recovery.

## Queen For a Day

Kathleen Ruth, College Station TX

I was twirling my pencil in Algebra when the Student Council President's perky voice came over the intercom to announce the homecoming court. Six lucky girls were chosen by the football team to reign over the homecoming festivities.

"I must have heard it wrong," I thought, "but I could swear he said my name." I was the flat-chested skinny girl, with knobby knees and braces, who blushed at roll call, had never been kissed, or had her hair frosted. Only in my dreams did a football player know I existed. I wasn't ready.

Three weeks later and the night had come. "You're ready," Mother assured me. I wasn't so sure.

The stadium had a magical feel. A starry night sky played second string to the lights that flooded the fan-filled bleachers and the freshly painted field. Girls, dressed for the homecoming dance in their white gloves and suits, proudly wore large mums pinned on their chests. Little boys and old men strutted on the sidelines, uncomfortable in their Sunday suits and dress shoes, too excited to complain. On a wooden platform, six metal folding chairs sat empty, ready for the homecoming court.

As a homecoming nominee, I was chauffeured around the football field in a creamy white convertible, as if it was my chariot. The band attempted *Pomp and Circumstance* while we formed a semi-circle facing the fans at the 50-yard line. The team captains, resplendent in white jerseys and tight pants, were ready with the queen's ceremonial robe and crown.

Silence blanketed the field as the announcer began. "The thrilling moment has arrived and we turn our attention to the center of the field where the nominees await the crowning of this year's queen."

Under the glare of the stadium lights and the flash of cameras, within sight of the whole town, I heard my name called and I was ready—because the robe, the crown, and one of the six empty chairs were only mine for the evening. The memories, however, have lasted a lifetime.

## Good Morning, Beautiful

Keydra Collins, Lockhart TX

As I step out of bed, I replay a tune in my head from the day before. I stand and turn on the radio. To my surprise, that song in my head is playing on the airwaves.

So I turn it up a notch and sing along to *Good Morning, Beautiful*. Today will be a wonderful day, says a voice just above a whisper. I know I'll be okay even if everything I face I can't always change.

It's noon. I just made it back from school. Today was supposed to be a wonderful day, and I was supposed to be okay. But it's not, and I'm not. Things didn't go well for me, and I'm very upset.

## We Danced

Linda Hoye, Auburn WA

We had enjoyed our meal in one of the a-la-carte restaurants and, although it was a bit surreal to have a steak dinner at a Mayan Riviera resort, we left the restaurant satisfied, having enjoyed a good meal and good conversation together.

Gerry took my hand and the warm evening air caressed my bare shoulders as we walked along the tiled pathway and cut through the open eating area where we had enjoyed lunch a few hours earlier. A few people sat at the bar enjoying an after-dinner drink and part of the area was roped off. There was a wedding party going on.

I couldn't resist taking a peek at the celebration as we walked by, and I saw a happy crowd doing the motions to the song, *Y-M-C-A*, as performed by a Mexican band. Gerry and I glanced at each other and smiled. Who could help but get caught up in the fun and romance of a wedding party?

We stepped down from the tiled floor and entered the main pool area where subdued lighting cast a soft glow around the perimeter of the pool. We couldn't resist the urge to raise our arms above our heads as the chorus started again. *It's fun to stay at the Y-M-C-A!* We bopped along keeping time with the music.

When the song ended we continued our leisurely stroll. Suddenly the band started playing a slow song and we spontaneously turned toward one another. Gerry embraced me and we began to waltz along beside the pool.

We had found each other later in life, both battle-scarred, and slightly hesitant about starting over again. Nevertheless we took a chance, threw caution to the wind, followed our hearts and married. He made me laugh again; he awakened dreams that had long since been forgotten; our different personalities complemented each other as we began a new chapter in our lives together.

On this exceptional night he held me in his arms and we danced. We danced.

I turn my music back on and try to relax. This time I sing along, and then I just start to dance. As I dance, I feel myself releasing the anger.

Tears start to roll down my face. Just the sweet sound of music helps my body relax and let go.

I close my eyes and say to myself: *I couldn't change everything this morning. But, yes, I am beautiful. Thank you! And, yes, I am smart. Thank you! And, yes, it is a wonderful day.*

## Requiem

Kathi Kouguell, Exeter NH

We were able to be at home until Saturday morning  
 when he requested to be transferred to the hospice house  
 He knew that the end was near  
 I was calm  
 I was in a state that did not resemble me at all  
 The nurse and I made the arrangements  
 The ambulance came  
 One of the attendants was studying Russian  
 and after asking him about his accent  
 they spoke Russian together  
 I thought that I had lost my mind as I ran downstairs  
 to my car so that I could follow the ambulance  
 Since I did not know where the hospice house was  
 I drove as close to the ambulance as I dared because  
 I also wanted him to be reassured that I was there with him  
 At the house they immediately put him into a room  
 and gathered around him talking excitedly  
 When there was a moment while they left the room  
 he asked if I could tell them that he could not stand all the noise  
 and activity so close to him  
 I slept in the room in a recliner so I could see him  
 Family, friends, and flowers came  
 I watched him closely  
 Tuesday morning his breathing accelerated and became  
 Louder  
 I should have known  
 I sat with him  
 He lay on his back  
 His eyes closed  
 I held his hand  
 Suddenly he lifted the hand holding mine up into the air  
 I looked at him  
 His eyes opened  
 They were a beautiful deep grey  
 And his breathing stopped

## The Day I Danced With a Blue-Footed Partner

Pat Bean, Harker Heights TX

The large white and brown bird with the blue feet didn't recognize my right to the hiking path. Its home here in The Galapagos Islands, where man has not yet imposed his predatory nature, let it assume it was my equal.

I stopped about a foot away and was quickly mesmerized as the two of us, human and bird, stared eye-to-eye. My birding knowledge finally kicked in, however, and I identified the bird in front of me as a male blue-footed booby. The sex-distinguishing clue was that the pupil in its pale yellow eye was smaller than the pupil of the bird sitting on two eggs in a nest beside the path. I assumed the two birds were mates.

As these birder thoughts filtered through my brain, the booby blocking my way lifted his right foot and gazed quizzically at me. I didn't move. He put the right foot down and lifted his left foot and bobbed his head a few times.

I smiled at him, and he repeated the maneuvers, the same ones I assumed he had used to woo his breeding female. When he lifted his left foot for the third time, I lifted my right foot in reply. For the next couple of minutes he and I continued this Hokey Pokey. It might have gone on longer except the rest of the tour group caught up.

"Don't tease the bird," our guide said when he saw me.

"I'm not," I replied. "He wanted to dance with me."

But since I could feel a thread of impatience coming from the people behind me, I moved off the path and started around the booby. We had been warned not to touch any of the Galapagos animals.

The booby had no such compulsive restraint. He reached out and gave my leg a quick, non-threatening peck as I passed by him. It felt both like a good-bye handshake, and an invitation to "come back and dance with me."

## Dancing Toward Life

Jane Steig Parsons, Austin TX

One morning at 1:00 am in 2004, severe abdominal pain drove me to the Austin Diagnostic Clinic Emergency Room. I did not return home for nine weeks.

After my surgery it was very painful to even sit up; standing was torture. I did everything in my power to remain horizontal, even while eating. After much attempted evasion I realized that my physical therapists would not take "no" for an answer when it came to their insistence on my perambulating uncertainly down the hall, leaning heavily on my walker, complaining mostly under my breath, thinking wicked thoughts, and trailing various plugged-in rolling medical equipment.

"How am I ever going to make myself do this?" I screamed inside my head in utter despair.

Suddenly I knew. I have always loved ballroom dancing. I would not walk; I would dance. I concentrated all my then-functioning mental powers upon creating greatly modified dance steps, listening to melodies in my head, and gasping aloud the beats as I lurched slowly down the halls. Day after day after day. Fox trot, east coast swing, tango, rumba, cha-cha, mambo, and a flat footed samba.

Difficult? Absolutely. Painful and exhausting? You bet! Achievable? Definitely yes!

## A Silly Looking Toe

Judie Hansen, Eugene OR

When I was ten, I began tap and ballet lessons, including toe. I dreamed of one day being a prima ballerina. Three years later, it came time for our spring recital with beautiful pale blue satin costumes for dancing to *The Skaters Waltz*. I had so much pain in my left foot that I couldn't perform. All through my teenage years, wearing high heeled shoes caused my foot to swell and be painful. When I was nineteen I went to an orthopedic surgeon to find out what was causing all the trouble. He removed the second metatarsal joint and created a skin joint with a three inch circle of skin from my stomach. (Try explaining that to every doctor who looks at your stomach—there are no body parts to be removed there.)

In 1956, skin joints were a brand new technology. I was the first person in the world to have such an operation on a foot. Everything went fine until not too long after I was off crutches, but still going to physical therapy, I attended a dance at the Kappa Alpha fraternity house at Randolph Macon College in Virginia. As my partner swung me out on a fast jitterbug, a fellow fraternity brother with size 13 shoes flew by and stepped on my left foot. Not only did it ruin the operation, it broke another bone in the same foot, and I landed back in the hospital for a week with a large cast.

Since there was now no way to put the foot back together or connect the second toe except with muscle and skin, that toe has had a mind of its own for the past 54 years. I have never been able to wear anything but flat shoes and there isn't a day without pain in that foot. My pink satin toe shoes with the pink bunny fur inserts hang on the wall of my bedroom for the ten year old ballerina in my head and, by golly, my 72 year old body can still jitterbug.

## Sapphire and Jade

Rose McCorkle, Austin TX

As Rachel, my sister, and I drove into the Yukon territory, Anchorage felt like a distant memory. We had to reach Austin in six days, which meant sleeping cramped behind the steering wheel or scrunched up on the seat. Exhausted, we rounded the mountain one morning to the stunning sight of the sun glinting from a lake the color of glacier ice. Rachel said, "That's the most beautiful lake I've seen. It's as stunning as any sapphire."

The lake was surrounded by picturesque pines looking as though they were holding the water in its boundaries. I pulled the truck off the road to revel in the beauty. The air was brisk on my face and, as I touched the water, it energized me. I felt I could keep on driving, holding on to this powerful feeling.

Reluctantly, we left the lake and drove ahead on the craggy road. After winding through the mountains, we happened upon a lake even more breathtaking than the first. It was the color of jade, my favorite color. I swerved across both lanes and slid to a stop on the loose gravel. I stripped down to my bare flesh as fast as I

## Eight Counts

Marion Hunt, Berkeley CA

### *Shuffle, Step (one, and two)*

I want to dance.

I want to feel my heart, a metronome, beating steadily  
With the rhythms in my soul.

I want to grab the rhythm with my arms, my legs, my torso.  
Heels and toes firmly tapping a melody.

### *Shuffle, Step (three, and four)*

I want to smile with the rhythms,

Laugh with the rhythms,

Wrap my arms around them.

### *Shuffle (five, and)*

I want to feel the alignment of body, soul, rhythm, and  
melody.

Charged emotion of the moves, just right,

In balance, in time, off-beat,

Electric.

### *Ball Change (six, and)*

I want to give myself permission to forgive.

To do more than I believe I can.

I want to break through self-restraints, self-doubts.

Allow myself the freedom to explore ME.

To unwrap the gifts I keep packaged tightly within.

To tap out the melody of acceptance and elation,

To recognize the spirit of ME.

### *Shuffle (seven, and)*

I want this.

If only eight counts at a time.

Touch! (Eight!)

could and dove into the icy water. It was numbing and exhilarating, taking my breath. As I stood up, I scooped gravel from the bottom and let chips of green fall through my fingers, gently splashing into the water.

Rachel broke my trance yelling, "Get out of there! Someone will see you!"

I responded, "To hell with them! I'm never going to get this chance again!"

I dived again, eyes open, marveling at the green chips that colored the lake before swimming back to shore. I dabbed myself dry with my clothes then donned them again for the ride.

We made it home in six days, but the rest of the trip paled in comparison to that thirty minutes. I still count as one of my greatest memories my adventure skinny dipping in what I later learned is called Jade Lake.

## Finding Family

Carolyn Donnell, San Jose CA

April 1995. All I wanted was a passport, but my birth certificate was not accepted. Born in California, then adopted in Texas, they wanted either my original birth record from California or adoption papers. My adopted parents had died many years ago so I couldn't ask them for help. I'd always heard adoption records were sealed so I didn't feel very optimistic, but I called California's Bureau of Records.

"You're in luck," the clerk said. "Texas never filed adoption papers, so your record isn't sealed." She sent me a copy.

Amazing! After all this time, all I had to do was pick up the phone and call. The same was true for the adoption papers.

I pored over new information and investigated for a while to no avail. One night in a pique of frustration I emailed everyone in CompuServe's directory in Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Colorado with the surnames on the certificate.

Several weeks later the answer arrived.

"Ethel was my grandmother and I think Lotta Mae might be my Aunt Pat. Call me. Greg."

My hand trembled as I dialed his phone number. A soft baritone voice answered. I told him I thought Lotta Mae might be my mother.

Total silence came from Greg's end of the phone. I almost hung up. Finally he said, "I'll talk to my dad. I'll call you back by ten o'clock tonight."

We hung up. *Yeah, right*, I thought, but about 9:35 pm the phone rang. Greg's excited voice said, "You've found the right family, alright. Dad knows all about it. He's at a meeting tonight, but will call tomorrow."

Next morning the phone rang on cue. My uncle's first words were, "Oh honey. I hoped I'd get to meet you someday."

I immediately began to cry.

He continued. "We've always thought about you and prayed you were okay."

We talked for a while. My mother and sister live in Minnesota and an aunt lived in Seattle. Big family. I got the passport, but I didn't make it to Europe. Fate had other destinations in mind.

## I Dance to the Background Music

Margaret Stephenson, Austin TX

Yearning to have another child seems selfish when I already have two beautiful daughters and friends with heartbreaking fertility issues. I relish being pregnant, nursing, reading together, and the endless fascinating discussions. I have always imagined myself with three kids and have never had trouble getting pregnant, so when my second daughter turns two, my husband and I tune out any concerns and are elated to try for another.

I quickly become pregnant, family and friends are happy for us, and I hear the heartbeat at the first visit with my midwife. Around twelve weeks, I know immediately what it means when the midwife has trouble finding the heartbeat; my throat and eyes begin to hurt while my joy rapidly changes to a deep ache. The sonogram technician is uncomfortable and doesn't look me in the eyes as she's studying the screen. No one says much; the office workers look sympathetic. I tell everyone I'm fine. I tell myself I'm tough, that it's selfish to be sad, that I have two perfect children already and I can always try again.

The next pregnancy seems perfect until I wake up in the middle of the night during the tenth week and feel the breath knocked out of me as I think I see a yellowish-white light move through me and into the air. Mixed with a burst of sadness is also a feeling of comfort and a sense that everything is okay. This time my midwife cries.

The third pregnancy ends quietly at about three months. Others suggest I focus on something besides having another baby. I don't want to believe they are right but I am exhausted and relieved to be concentrating on a future with my two children. An unexpected pregnancy arrives not long after the third miscarriage, poignantly re-igniting my hope, and my beautiful son makes his way into the world in his own time.

My swiftly changing emotions create the background music as I dance with life.

## Life Dance

Khadijah Lacina  
Shihr Yemen

new life within  
the dance begins  
delicate balance  
sought  
between self and other  
hope and fear  
dreams shift  
jigsaw puzzle  
overturned  
a love so strong  
grows  
overflows  
the rim of  
a carefully  
balanced cup  
I long for home  
with a fierceness  
I had thought tamed  
for the smell of green  
gentle touch of snow  
taste of rain licked  
from parched lips  
the soul of home  
or maybe  
I just want  
my mother

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## Belly Dance of Life

Edith O’Nuallain, Greystones, County Wicklow, Ireland

Though it was only late October, too early in the year for the winter chill to have arrived, still that night it was bitterly cold. A north-easterly wind from the steppes of Siberia arrived at my door, howling and whirling. Lifting the latch of my door, I stepped out into the wind. Icy tentacles stretched across my aching belly, cutting through my flesh like sharp, jagged shards of broken glass.

Another terrifying, knife-like cramp ripped through me, gripping my womb in its vice-like hold. Moaning in unison with the spreading cramp, I turned my eyes skywards.

The dark vault of the night sky was clear and cloudless. Sparks of glittering light shone out even brighter against the deep blue, so dark it was almost black. Caught in the throes of birth, which felt like death, I roared in pain, writhing like a wild animal. Thrusting my fist upwards to the heavens above, I screamed in defiance, “I will birth this child tonight.”

Waves of pain came searing through my womb, beating their rhythm upon my belly, marking time with the galaxies whirling and twirling above. Pure, mystical pain, like points of starlight, surrounded me, enfolding my being within the pulsing rhythm of this eternal and timeless dance of life. I was a labouring woman, gasping and screaming, roaring, birthing new life, new beginnings, into being.

And then the final wave, like a tsunami, threatened to engulf me, to drown me in its power and intensity. The time was now. To save myself and my baby from the cold and cruel grip of death, I pushed. Gathering my life force into one last gasp, I made the final assault, forcing my way through the barrier that held this child of my heart captive within. My love for her took me soaring and rising above the endless waves of crashing pain, until suddenly I was free, gliding with my babe, blood of my blood, heart of my heart, through the portal of her hidden realm to emerge and dance together in this shiny new world of love and milk.

## Wedding in Algiers

Shawn Essed, Taneytown MD

The first trip to his home was the hardest. I’d never been to a place like that before, a developing country. There were trash heaps along the roadside, plastic bags clinging to tree branches; shards of glass and barbed wire atop stone walls surrounding homes; armed guards stopping traffic; and many women with covered heads. I’d never known real drought. Daily, children lugged water jugs from the well of a generous neighbor and people from the high rises protested because when the city occasionally turned on the water, the pressure was so low it didn’t go above the second floor.

He hadn’t been home for seven years. He suffered America for me, for our children, but he was always homesick. So finally when the papers were straight, we went.

Upon arrival he left me with kind strangers, while he wept and visited and tried to recapture the life he’d left. I felt alone and belittled, kept in his parents’ house with the children day after day, eating sweets with extended family who tried to talk to me, but I couldn’t understand.

One afternoon we went to a distant cousin’s wedding. We ate honeyed pastries and drank mint tea while watching the bride parade through in her many dresses. An uncle told him to tell me that if we’d married there, our wedding would have far surpassed this one. I smiled.

Then we all went to dance. The men raised their arms and the women circled around them clapping and dancing. A cousin tied a scarf around my hips and showed me, “Move from the belly.” The old women trilled, *Yoo, yoo, yoo, yeeee*. We danced with the crowd, his mother, sister, brother, and cousins galore. The band tapped their hand drums and tambourines, and he sang along in guttural Arabic.

I saw him like never before, radiating life. I understood what he’d sacrificed for me. And there on the dance floor, where it is taboo to touch, he reached for me. When I came to him, he shone the brightest of all.

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## The Unending Sequence

Lucy Ann Albert, La Mesa CA

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When I’m folk dancing, I’m often in a circle; everyone is equal, and we all dance together as a unit. I can’t go faster or slower than the group, or make up my own steps. I must stay with the pace of the rest, and with their style—unless I want to completely break away from the group and dance by myself, or look for my own followers. The circle is broken if I pull away from the others, trailing a line of dancers snaking around the room behind me.

Other folk dances are performed with a partner, and sometimes sets of four or six partners form the unit. With ballroom dancing, I only have one partner and we move as a unit. There is no group.

Life is like dancing—but I must know which dance I’m doing. In the beginning I am equal with all the others, we form a single unit, as in my early kindergarten days, and then elementary school. As I grow older, in high school smaller groups are formed, and sometimes a leader breaks away from the group, trailing others behind her.

After graduation, it is a shock to find myself dispersed from the group, cast out on my own. Where are the others? Can I dance by myself? Did I ever learn to do that? Should I try to join a group of those who dance like me? Or should I look for a partner

**cont on page 17**

## Rough Threads in the Tapestry of Life

Martha Bashore, San Antonio TX

Looking around the table at the smiling faces of my family, along with the delicious aromas wafting from the kitchen of another holiday dinner, brings fleeting thoughts of Norman Rockwell paintings to mind. Grandparents, aunts, young parents, and the children all holding hands, heads bowed in genuine thanks. Yet lurking are the painful, jagged edges of things rarely seen in Rockwell's life recordings.

The turkey is carried in, held high like a rare artifact, and I make note of this real life scene which includes the appropriate *ahhhs* and soft laughter. The baby is excitedly clapping his hands while his brother, trying to look grown-up, looks at his grandfather and mimics his smile.

The young girl gives her Mona Lisa smile. We know she is happy and is waiting expectantly for her dinner, but her gaze is not engaged. My mind scans back over many scenes with these loved ones. Images flash by quickly, like a movie running backwards.

"Congratulations," the doctor says, "not only is she a beautiful baby, she is perfectly healthy. Just think, both her birth weight and date are 7/12. With her looks and those lucky numbers, Hannah has quite a future ahead of her."

"Congratulations, Hannah is a wonderful student," the teacher says proudly.

"Congratulations, Hannah's physical exam is fine; there is no reason to not give her the vaccine, and many reasons to do it," proclaims the pediatrician. Three hours stream by. The setting is now in a hospital emergency room with lights flashing, pumps humming, tubes and wires in a tangle across my grandchild's body as doctors and nurses work frantically to interrupt a non-ending seizure.

I think of Rockwell once again, but this is my family displaying the depth of love, made stronger through Hannah's life trials. Her determination in the face of difficult circumstances and her belief of better tomorrows has become the wind beneath our wings. Perhaps this is more like a tapestry of multi-textured threads woven into a fabric that strong and beautiful.

### The Unending Sequence (cont from page 16)

who dances exactly as I do—who easily follows my lead, or whom I can follow. I do find one. We dance together and face the world as a unit. We are lucky and we even make more dancers, enlarging our group.

But soon the whole dance begins again, as parts of our unit eventually break away to find groups of their own, and then partners, just as we did.

These are the steps to dancing with life. With luck, we learn them well. Some inventive people even create new dances; but most of us follow the old ones and join the unending sequence.

## The Night I Was 'Specially Beautiful

Susan Ideus, Magnolia TX

My husband doesn't dance—no questions asked, he just doesn't.

A friend was getting married and our family was invited to wedding and reception. Our daughters, Becca and Johanna, were excited to attend their first such grown-up affair. For weeks before, they played bride and groom, arguing about who would be bride. I told them that weddings called for calm cooperation, and each of them said, "Remind her!"

The ceremony was lovely and punctuated by only a few questions. "Why are people crying, Mom? I thought weddings were happy."

"Why did she (the bride) have to give her flowers away? That other girl already had some."

And, of course, "When is this over? I have to go to the bathroom."

At last we were on our way to the reception. The girls' faces lit up in wonderment at their first sight of the room draped in satin and lace with flowers everywhere. "It's like Cinderella's ball."

"Uh-uh, it's the wedding inception."

"Reception, you silly girl."

We found a table, secured snacks and punch for the girls, a bit of champagne for ourselves, and settled back for one of our favorite activities: people watching, drawing occasional "ooh's" and "ahh's" from the girls as they searched the room for their favorite dress.

The bride and groom at long last arrived, announcing that they would begin the dancing for the evening. "Dance, you guys!" urged our young companions. I tried to distract them as I knew Harold would not set a foot on that dance floor. Finally I whispered, "Daddy doesn't like to dance."

In something resembling not a whisper but more like a bellow, our younger daughter, Johanna, responded, "Dad, you've got to dance with Mom. She's so 'specially beautiful tonight."

"Jo, you're absolutely right."

"May I have this dance, beautiful lady?" he said with a grin and a bow. It was a slow number and we "danced" our way around the floor, much to the delight of our daughters, who clapped whenever we were close. I'm not sure Harold ever relaxed but he held me tenderly and held his head high. And, yes, I did feel 'specially beautiful.

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## Yoga: A Life Affirming Dance

Suellen Rust, Tionesta PA

I had always been fascinated with yoga. It was one of those things I was going to do someday. I found a class in a nearby town. The instructor was young and lithe and seemed fairly nice. I didn't know any of the other members of the class and most were older than me, gray-haired, and well—older. To my chagrin they were much better at the poses and moves than I, who could not keep up and felt awkward. I was glad I had only paid for one class instead of the month.

Soon after that, I happened to notice a posting in the library of the town where I work for a free yoga class. I signed up. There was a terrible storm and power outage on the day of the class, so it was canceled. I was still determined so I called the instructor and signed up for her next regular class. Despite my flashbacks to my other first-class experience, I rolled out my mat and began.

The instructor made a point to reassure us that we could do as much or as little as we felt was right and safe for us. I still remember the four points she stressed: open-mindedness, perseverance, safety, and the most important of all—no judgments about your own or anyone else's performance. In the ensuing classes she taught us to tune into our bodies, pay attention to how things felt, and appreciate the release.

I still remember vividly the most profound and total feeling of relaxation I felt after that first class. In that 90 minute class I was able to give up years of built up stress. Three years later I'm still attending her classes.

I do yoga every morning and can't imagine starting my day any other way. I have learned to tune in to my body and give it what it needs in many ways including nutrition, meditation, acceptance, and forgiveness. My increased flexibility in body, mind, and spirit truly contributes to a joyous dance through life.

## Sing and Dance

Charlotte Smith, Lockhart TX

My soul mate of 30 years, Papa Bear, looked and acted like a movie star, until age 68 when he joined Fred Astaire in heaven. Papa Bear's favorite expression was, "Sing and Dance," a reference to Astaire.

Papa Bear's mother was abusive, but the one good thing she did for him was send him to Bud Nash Dancing School in San Antonio, Texas. Papa Bear was the most popular partner at high school dances.

Together, we danced at clubs. We danced on cruise ships. Whenever we danced, people would stop, form a circle, and just watch us: another Fred and Ginger. He would dip me to the floor—one inch from the ground—and pull me up to his chest, with just one arm. I, of course, loved to dance too.

I took ballet and tap as a child. Almost 60 now, I don't remember the actual lessons or where I took them or what I wore. I remember just a few tap steps: shuffle, shuffle, ball change.

As an adult, I bought a pair of black Mary Janes at a store that sold to dancers in casino shows in Las Vegas. The owner asked if I danced in a show. I said, "No." She said I had dancers' legs. I had her put taps on the bottom of those shoes.

I've worn the shoes for years. The heels don't wear down because the metal taps protect them. My favorite place to dance is down the aisles when I grocery shop. The smooth, flat surface of the linoleum makes a good sound with my taps. The store is also perfect because Papa Bear lived in his grandfather's house, built in 1921, and he would have hung me by the heels if I'd scratched the old wooden floors.

We aren't cheek to cheek right now. But someday, we will dance together again—this time for an eternity, through the heavens, atop stars and moons.

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## Carmella's Story

Connie Katusak, Leander TX

I was a child when cousin Carmella, a diminutive, dynamo with wild curling gray hair piled in a topknot, entered my field of memory. Solemn, seldom smiling, she was always working on an important commission. A wide straight pin bracelet adorned her left wrist, testimony to the job at hand.

"I will be rich and famous," she had shouted when the family disembarked at Ellis Island, destination upstate, New York. Forgoing school, she quickly found a job cleaning and doing odd jobs in a fabric store. Her exquisite skill with a needle soon promoted her to alterations. Frocks created from scraps of bolts brought added income and the notice of several wealthy and prominent women. Tempted by New York City and promise of a job on Seventh Ave, she eloped with a wealthy older man. But aspirations often collide with reality. The stock market crash ended

her fledgling design career and marriage. She returned home with a \$5,000 settlement, promptly invested in a house, and launched a new career. No time for tears.

Carmella was a seamstress *extraordinaire*, whose distinctive specialty was creating magnificent wedding gowns, satin and lace studded, with hand sewn simmering sequins and pearls. Converting the parlor into a salon, she interviewed prospective customers and served them Italian coffee and cookies. The front bedroom became the sewing room, factory Singer against one wall, flanked by an over-stuffed dressmaker's dummy holding pieces of a future frock. An antique cabinet against another wall contained drawers filled with bright buttons, sparkling sequins,

cont on page 19

## Katey

Lois Halley, Westminster MD

In the dust-covered box on the top shelf of the old woman's garage, I found it.  
Beneath the old pay stubs, and greeting cards, and bits of candles, it lay.  
The tiny, leather-bound volume that fit into the palm of a hand, Dirt now ground in, the gold-edged pages brittle and torn,  
I clutched it to my heart and remembered...  
The heart and soul of a gentle woman,  
The tiny tome cradled reverently in peasant hands.  
The maiden aunt kneeling on the wooden bench,  
Head bowed and lips moving silently in prayer.  
The same strong hands, chafed and calloused, that made the huckleberry pies.  
She had walked a mile in each direction to pick the wild fruit.  
Wearing her flowered cotton apron that could dry a child's tears,  
She heated up the coal stove, her unwritten recipe now gone forever.  
When the silk mill closed, and the only work she could find was washing dishes,  
She was thankful.  
There was a time she clothed her youthful figure in the stylish fashions of the day,  
And had a beau who courted her.  
Jilted, she loved him still, and could not bring herself to choose another.  
So, she became Babka.  
"Sit in the grass with me," she told the child.  
"Let us search for four-leaf clovers, which will bring good luck."  
Searching in the grass on a summer afternoon, the child replied, "I can't find any."  
"Don't worry, for you will." But the child found not one.  
One snowy, stormy Christmas Eve, the gifts wrapped and the Polish supper waiting,  
Babka went to sweep the steps before the guests arrived.  
That was when the kind and generous heart stopped forever.  
The cycle of decades passed, and my own hands open the small book.  
What is that, slipping from the pages?  
Onto my lap, in fulfillment of an ages old promise,  
Fell a perfectly preserved four-leaf clover.

### Carmella's Story (cont from page 18)

rhinestone ropes, ribbons, and laces. Carmella deftly transformed shimmering silky material into chic gowns adorning them with the contents of the cabinet. She also created elegant gowns for the opera company—dazzling creations that glimmered under theater lights.

I thought how fortunate she was, surrounded by all that beauty. Circumstances curbed her childhood ambition of fame and fortune, but she was beloved by the many brides she dressed. She was a strong, brave woman who faced what life had dealt her with courage, dignity, and no complaints.

## One, Two, Cha-Cha-Cha

Fifi Heller-Kaim, El Paso TX

"One, two, cha-cha-cha; one, two, cha-cha-cha. The lady always steps back, letting the gentleman lead."

I listened as my grandmother gave me gentle instructions in her living room. We listened to the hi-fi, and my grandmother led me around. "Oh, no, you don't need to count. Let the music count for you. Feel the beat and dance!"

We kept dancing. Sometimes, my grandmother led. Other times, she stood next to me and followed my beat, laughing and singing along. I had yet to hear anything better than the sounds from my grandmother's hi-fi.

Those evenings spent dancing in my grandmother's living room were magical. I was graceful and better than any dancer on any stage. My Mama Fina said so!

Sometimes we would move into the dining room and dance around the table to my favorite song, *Lisboa Antigua*. "Laaa, la, la, laa, tlalalala, tlalalala, la, la, laaaa."

We would glide on the carpet, swaying and dancing. I felt the music; the beat resonated in my heart. How I loved these moments! I never wanted to stop.

Then somehow we did stop. Instead, I started dancing with boys. The years flew by with the inevitable: college, marriage, family. I still visited my grandmother weekly and we played the old hi-fi. We remembered those wonderful days, dancing in the living room and around the table. At this point, my grandmother was in a smaller apartment, and she no longer danced because she was in a wheelchair.

We would play *Lisboa Antigua*, wishing we could dance together one more time. One day, I took the handles of the wheelchair and started pushing and sliding her around the room in sync with the music. We both sang along, "La, la, tlalalalala." Tears of joy and melancholy flowed down our faces. In that moment, I was a little girl again and my grandmother was a younger woman, teaching me to love dance.

My grandmother died at 99 in '99. She had wanted to make it to 2000 so she could have lived in three centuries. I wish she had made it too.



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## A Conversation With Peggy Tabor Millin

by Lisa Shirah-Hiers

Peggy Tabor Millin is the author of *Women, Writing and Soul-Making: Creativity and the Sacred Feminine*. Based in Asheville, North Carolina, she is a writer, writing guide, retreat leader, and owner and founder of Clarityworks, whose mission is “to offer programs in the written word that guide women in developing their voices so they can stand in their power and inspire positive change in their world.” Lisa Shirah-Hiers interviewed her via email for the Story Circle Journal.

*SCJ: What made you decide to write *Women, Writing and Soul-Making*? Who were you writing for?*

PTM: I wrote the book for myself to discover what I have learned from almost 15 years of leading writing groups for women and I wrote the book to tell women that given a feminine approach (right-brained and body-centered) and a supportive community of women they can write and can write their truth. Writing in groups empowers individuals. It does not matter what we write about or whether we are conscious of our process; writing heals and changes lives.

*SCJ: What do you hope readers will get from your book?*

PTM: One of the first comments I get from readers is “this book made me cry.” Women cry because in telling my story, I have told theirs. For the first time, they feel that their creative struggles have been understood. Their hearts open to themselves. That’s really the lesson of life: to learn to hold our own selves in our hearts.

*SCJ: In your book you describe having to start over when you realized you had written to publish rather than writing the book that wanted to exist. What was wrong with this approach?*

PTM: In trying to write what publishers wanted, I produced a how-to book that depended a great deal on what other people said. It might have sold, but wasn’t mine. After the rewrite I submitted to agents without success, I came to understand that their criteria are money-based, while my desire is to share a truth I deeply hold. I felt strongly that women would respond to my book if I told my story and what I have learned. This has definitely been the case so far.

*SCJ: Describe the process of finding your own way to structure your book.*

PTM: [W]hen I started to rewrite the book from an outline, my stomach clenched. Finally, I closed my eyes and said, “Okay, book. You tell me how to write this.” Almost instantly I knew I had to use Centered Writing Practice, which is a feminine approach and the one I teach. I had to let go of what I thought the book should be and let it emerge as what it wanted and needed to be. The book was saying “Practice what you preach.” This process was all very intuitive. I went through journals and picked out writes I liked that I’d done in classes with my students. I would choose one and use it as a prompt with the intention of connecting it to writing and women.

*SCJ: In your book you describe the “Power Principle” (a more accurate, purely descriptive term for patriarchy) and how this has dominated the publishing field. As you say, “To the degree the Power Principle prevails, the language of books, as well as their content, will be subject to its standards.” Given this, what advice do you have for women writers seeking to publish?*

PTM: First, write for yourself, not for publication. Write the book that is yours to write. Second, there is no harm in trying for an agent and acceptance by a large publishing house, but don’t give up if you don’t get a bite. Third, if this fails, look for small publishers who publish the kind of book you have written. Fourth, self-publish – there are many ways to do this. The bottom line is that no matter how you publish, you have to be prepared to do the marketing yourself. Only on rare occasions do publishers pay for book tours or marketing. Also, with big publishing houses, you generally have only three months to make your book sell a quantity large enough that the publisher will keep it on their list. Small publishers usually keep books on the market longer and if you self-publish, it’s your choice.

*SCJ: In your book you describe “Centered Writing Practice” (CWP) which comes “[w]hen we combine physical centeredness in the belly and free writing to neutral prompts with active practice, both solitary and in community.....” Describe the journey you undertook to discover and teach CWP.*

PTM: CWP emerged gradually and is still emerging, especially as I understand more about the role of the body. Beyond being aware that I gave a name to the process we were using I doubt that my students noticed. I focus on writing. I don’t spend time explaining the process or the possibilities for healing or spiritual growth. I feel that the experience of using CWP itself is the teacher. It meets people where they are and it works whether or not they understand why.

I had no idea of the power of the process until women started telling me, “You saved my life.” Although I feel it is the process, not I personally, that “saved their lives,” I accept that the leader of the group is responsible for the emotional safety of participants and that this is something I do very well. The feeling of safety allows participants the space to be them selves and to write their truth. Learning how to hold a safe space was a long process for me, one I began before I started teaching writing classes. I had to learn to be safe with myself first.

SCJ: Another theme is what you call “the wisdom of fierce compassion” which combines compassionate love and personal power which you call “power to” rather than “power over”. How do you see the role of women in claiming “the wisdom of fierce compassion”?

PTM: Compassion means “shared suffering.” To have compassion for others, we must have compassion for ourselves. Fierce compassion means we do not avert our gaze from suffering. This is our most important action because by looking straight at what is before us we accept our responsibility in the matter. There’s a line from my book *Mary’s Way*, “We never touch people so lightly that we do not leave a trace.” When we look on a person or an event with fierce compassion, we touch them. We join humanity rather than trying to separate ourselves from the “other.” In order to change anything, we have to see it clearly first. Then we have to be willing to open our hearts to what we see including our part in it. Only then should we engage our minds to examine what actions might meet the need of our hearts to respond.

Pelted with so much information about so many catastrophes, it is not surprising that we want to turn away. Women especially turn away, because it is painful to see suffering through the heart. We can’t all travel to disaster zones and, if we’re honest, a part of us wants to leave it to the men to fix. We feel powerless to “do” anything. Fierce compassion asks us to thoroughly experience all our feelings related to our own and others’ suffering. Our action then comes from our hearts as a donation, a direct service, a prayer. The prayer of fierce compassion acknowledges the pain in our hearts while asking for the relief of suffering for all of us. Tonglen, a Buddhist technique used by persons of many faiths, provides a specific practice to develop fierce compassion.

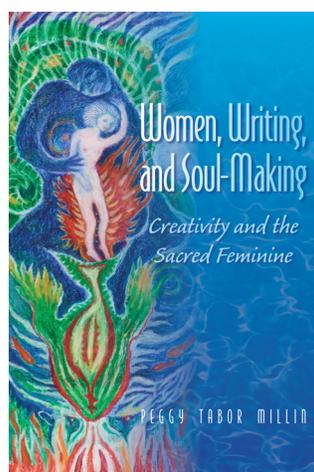
SCJ: Do you think women see things differently than the way men do?

PTM: Generally, yes, though there’s a whole range within each gender. Is there such a thing as a “female” culture or aesthetic? Yes. Just think of how all-male or all female-groups behave. If someone of the opposite sex enters, the group dynamic changes. What’s more important is not to divide by gender so we start thinking in terms of right/wrong. Feminine and masculine are different energies and each has its positive attributes and its shadow side. We must learn how to select the attributes we need in a particular instance and then to synthesize the feminine with the masculine. For example, as a leader I might need to learn the masculine skill of discerning right action and synthesizing it with my feminine skill for nurturance. Why are people so resistant to the idea that women and men think or experience things differently? When all the equal-rights movements effected change in the sixties and seventies, perhaps we over-generalized the word

“equal.” Usually when a new concept comes into a culture or system, it is over-generalized before it swings back to center. I think we’re moving back to center on this one. Women really do not want to be like men nor men like women.

SCJ: Underlying your book is a call to “claim one’s voice”. Is this particularly problematic for women?

PTM: I can’t speak for men, but I know many of us women have difficulty accepting that we have the right to speak our truth. All those centuries of being ridiculed, punished, even killed for our words. In many cultures, women weren’t allowed to speak at all; their only power was whatever influence they could have on their husbands. I don’t think we can appreciate what the American



**“Stand up straight. Own yourself. Claim your soul and its destiny. You are a writer. Nothing takes that away. Joyful word-making—that is what writing is. Joyful word-making, artful soul-making.”**  
( pp. 200-201)

suffragettes endured to give us the right to vote. Younger women cannot imagine a world in which they would not have the right to play sports or run for congress or go to medical school. Why is it so challenging or even frightening? This is probably a simplified answer: Women are all about relationship. Our psychological safety lies in our relationships with other women; our physical safety (at least in the past) has relied on men. To claim our voice, we have to move out of these safety zones and out of socially accepted roles in order to stand alone in our own power.

Speaking out can threaten relationships and not just with men. Other women and whole families can shun a woman who steps out of her expected place and speaks her mind. I think the fear women hold is not “Who will I be if I take the risk of speaking my truth?” but “Who will be with me?” I notice that this is not a fear common only to women over forty. I have heard the same fears from women in their twenties and thirties. This surprised me because I perceived younger women as more confident and self-assured than I was at that age.

SCJ: Do women creatives have an especially important role?

PTM: I want to holler YES! Because we are all creative, we just have to claim it. The nature of the feminine is to create and to give the gifts of creation to others. We then receive back what we have given.

SCJ: What do you hope your own legacy will be to the next generation of women?

PTM: What a profound question. Every woman has to learn her own lessons. I am sure of that. But what I hope is that my book, my work, and students will inspire women to choose to forge their own heroine’s journey.

To find out more about Peggy Tabor Millin’s books and workshops and her 7-day Fearless Writing at the Beach retreat in South Carolina April 18 – 25 visit [www.clarityworksonline.com](http://www.clarityworksonline.com).



## Kitchen Table Stories

# Daddy's Mud and Biscuits

by Patricia Nordyke Pando

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

**There was no telling what would happen in the Nordyke household when Momma left Daddy and the girls alone at suppertime.**

My mother knew her place. Most women did in the late 1940s. Her occupation described her location—she was a housewife. Her place was in the house; well, okay, sometimes it was in the yard, but mostly in the house vacuuming with the rickety Hoover her mother had almost worn out, stuffing the sheets in the old front-loading Bendix and then lugging the basket out to the back yard and pinning them to the line.

Mostly, though, Mother's place was in the kitchen. She didn't like cooking, and she was (by her own admission) lousy at it. But three times a day, she turned out a meal—those were in the Daddy-comes-home-to-lunch days. Daddy didn't cook at all; maybe he would make coffee, but only under duress.

Not only did Mother cook, Mother served (and cleaned up). She was never gone at dinnertime. Actually, she was never gone unless she was with me or Sally, or with Daddy. I remember only one time that Daddy fixed supper. Well, warmed-up supper.

Mother left a couple of pans of biscuits in the warm oven and two pots of canned soup on the stovetop—tomato for Daddy and chicken noodle for us. When the soup was hot Daddy poured it into the blue-willow soup bowls and joined us at the kitchen table. It was fun. He let us slurp the last few swallows right out of the bowl—forbidden behavior when Mother was around. He announced we'd have something special for dessert.

Sally and I hoped for ice cream. But, no. No ice cream.

"Even better than ice cream," Daddy told us as he headed for the oven.

"Silly Daddy! Nothing's better than ice cream."

Before supper he'd put a wrapped stick of butter on top of the stove. Now he unwrapped and dropped the gooey mess into another blue-willow soup bowl. Reaching down under the cabinet he pulled out a bottle of Grandma's Molasses.

"Ugh! Let's go get ice cream cones."

"You forgot, Momma has the car. Anyway, this is Grandmother Nordyke's favorite dessert. You'll like it."

I liked anything Grandmother Nordyke liked, so I went along. So did Sally, reluctantly.

Daddy took the butter, molasses, and three saucers back to the table. He dropped a puddle of butter on each saucer and poured molasses right in the middle. Then, he took his fork and started mashing.

"Make mud," he told us.

"Make mud? Daddy, this looks awful."

"Just mind me! Then put it on a biscuit before you complain." He handed us each a biscuit.

I minded. I tore the biscuit open and dropped a spoonful of mud on it. Then shut it back up, held my nose, and bit in.

Heaven! Why hadn't anyone made this for me before?

We ate all the biscuits—both pans. Daddy had to melt another stick of butter. I felt my skinny seven-year-old sides sticking out.

Mother was up early the next morning making kitchen noises. We trailed in, still in our pajamas, to say good morning. She was laying out eggs and bacon instead of our usual oatmeal.

"I thought I'd fix an extra special breakfast, since I had to be gone last night. She leaned over and open the oven door, then stood looking puzzled.

"Where are the biscuits?"

"We ate them," I said.

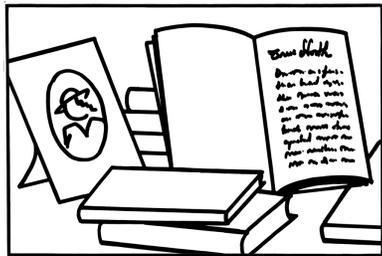
"You couldn't have eaten all of them. I made two pans."

"We ate them," Sally agreed.

"Lewie, where are the biscuits?" Mother called in the direction of the bathroom.

Daddy appeared in the kitchen door with a towel around his neck, one cheek bare, the other covered with shaving lather. He looked sheepish.

**cont bottom of next page**



## Story Circle Network's Book Reviews

# Our Review Team Needs You

by Susan Ideus

Story Circle Network hosts the most substantial women's book review site on the web. Read hundreds of reviews of books by, for, and about women. New reviews are added almost daily. Visit us at [www.storycirclebookreviews.org](http://www.storycirclebookreviews.org).

### Why SCBR?

We love books that tell the truth about women's lives or deliciously depict them in enlightening novels.

Browse our reviews, learn more about the authors. Our talented review team is comprised of women like YOU, who love to read and perhaps analyze the works of their favorite writers.

### FAQ's as Answered by Our Reviewers

*What is a good reason to be/become a reviewer for SCBR?*

Susan Schoch: "It can spread the word to women about books that might be valuable to them, and that they might not have known about, while at the same time encouraging me to read some books that I might not have otherwise taken the time to explore."

Mary Jo Doig: "It keeps me reading more of the latest books. It forces me to put into words my thoughts and responses to the book; thus I remember more specifics from it. It builds my professional resume. It's fun to find a book from SCBR in my mailbox!"

Judy Miller: "I became a reviewer because I love books—everything about them. By becoming a book reviewer, I now read with an additional perspective, a deeper appreciation for what goes onto the page and the craft and skill of the author. I also read books that I would not ordinarily pick up, expanding my interests as a reader and a writer."

Duffie Bart: "I love to read certain kinds of books and love analyzing why I enjoyed them; I love the process of thinking clearly which I must do if I review a book. I also love to bring awareness of a good book to others; this helps the author to find an audience and helps the audience to find books of interest."

Jennifer Melville: "A great reason to be a book reviewer for SCBR is that you'll always have a new book talk about! My friends are impressed that I review books and always come to me for ideas when they are looking for something new and exciting to read."

*What is your greatest reward in being a reviewer?*

Rhonda Esakov: "My greatest reward from reviewing books for SCBR is that I give a chance to some authors to have their very important voices heard. It is a wonderful feeling when an author sends a little note thanking me {us} for taking the time to give opinions, and in a way, validation for their feelings and hard work."

Doris Anne Roop-Benner: "My greatest reward is when I get feedback on the review and it has encouraged others to read the book. I also like knowing that the women authors get exposure and are rewarded—financially and otherwise—for writing the books."

Mary Jo Doig: "I really enjoy sharing my thoughts with others, and hope my reviews are as helpful to them as so many on the site are to me."

Sharon Wildwind: "I love being able to support a good woman writer."

Judy Miller: "For me, the greatest reward of being a book reviewer is to be part of a group of like-minded women who are passionate about books—writing and reading."

Susan Schoch: "An unexpected reward is that the exercise of writing reviews seems to make me a better writer. That's a great bonus."

INTERESTED? Visit our site at  
[www.storycirclebookreviews.org](http://www.storycirclebookreviews.org)

### Kitchen Table Stories (cont)

"We ate them."

"How did one man and two little girls eat two pans of biscuits?" Mother put her hands on her hips and gave him her you-cut-out-that-kidding look.

"We had 'em for dessert, Momma. With butter and molasses. Just the way Grandmother makes them," I explained.

"Not all of them."

"Every one of them," Sally chimed in.

"Well!" Mother laughed, "I hope you made them brush their teeth twice, Lewie. I never heard of so much sugar for supper."

### Daddy's Mud and Biscuits

2 batches of biscuits

Lots of butter (must be butter), softened, almost melting

Molasses (or any syrup that's handy)

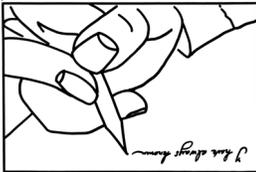
Pour the syrup onto a plate. Using a fork smash butter into the syrup until the mixture is the consistency of mud. Spread on the biscuits. Best if the biscuits are warm. Continue until you can't eat anymore.

*A long-time member of Story Circle Network and of the Internet Chapter, former SCN president Patricia Pando (usually known as Trilla) lives and writes in Houston. Sometimes she makes mud and biscuits with her Houstonian grandson.*

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Please make sure your stories are 350 words long  
and your poems are 30 lines or less



## 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 upcoming topics and deadlines:

**June 2010 (due April 15)—Home**  
**September 2010 (due July 15)—Autumn Dreams**  
**December 2010 (due Oct. 15)—In the Bleak Midwinter**  
**March 2011 (due Jan. 15)—It Started as an Ordinary Day**

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

## Susan Wittig Albert Lifewriting Contest 2010

Contest Entries Accepted  
Monday, May 17 through Friday, July 2

SCN is proud to announce its eleventh annual lifewriting competition named in honor of our founder, Susan Wittig Albert. This year's topic focuses on "Letting Go." Here are some wise words to get you started.

*"And then it hit me—control isn't power; it's fear.  
Real power is letting go."* ~Nancy Aronie

*"Breathe. Let go. And remind yourself that this very  
moment is the only one you know you have for sure."*  
~Oprah Winfrey

Write about a time you had to let go to move forward, a time when you recognized that holding on no longer made sense. What made you realize it was time to let go? How hard was it to do? What steps did you take? What did you learn along the way? How did the experience of letting go change you? How did it change your life? (Thank you, Mary Jo Doig, for this topic.)

The contest is open to dues-paying members of SCN and will be coordinated by SCN President Lisa Shirah-Hiers and Executive Director Peggy Moody. For contest entry fee, entry form, and further information, visit [www.storycircle.org/Contests](http://www.storycircle.org/Contests). Look for more details in the June *Journal* and in our upcoming monthly e-letters.