

# STORY CIRCLE JOURNAL

Vol. 15 No. 3, September 2011

The newsletter for women with stories to tell...

## Congratulations to the Winners of the 2011 Susan Wittig Albert LifeWriting Competition

by Lisa Shirah-Hiers

SCN is proud to announce the winners of our twelfth annual Susan Wittig Albert LifeWriting Competition! The judges were faced with a major challenge as they sorted through all the entries on the topic *Courage*, suggested by our Internet Chapter President, Lee Ambrose.

Congratulations to first place winner, Marlene Samuels of Chicago, IL for her story "Seren's Serenity Prayer." Second prize goes to Susan Flemr of Fairfield Bay, AR for "Rats and Roses." Nancilynn Saylor of Austin, TX took third place for "Dancing to the End of the Song" with fourth place held by Stephanie Dalley of Forestville, CA for "Arbitrary Violence, Determined Courage." Read about our award winning authors in the sidebar to the right and their stories on pages 4-7 of this issue of the journal, and at the website at: [storycircle.org/Contest/winners.shtml](http://storycircle.org/Contest/winners.shtml).

This contest is possible because of the many hours of reading and reflection by our 23 wonderful volunteer judges. Thanks to all of you and to co-chair, Peggy Moody, for your terrific organizational skills and web wonder-working. Thanks also to all the authors for your wonderful stories and the hard work you put in to writing them down for us all to enjoy. I encourage all of you to keep writing and to consider entering again next year.

If you did not enter the contest this year, I encourage you to explore this topic of "courage" in your own writing. It is an especially rich and rewarding one. And do consider entering the contest next summer. Win or lose you'll have a honed piece of writing you can be proud of.

## In This Issue . . .

President's Letter . . . . .	2
Stories From The Heart VI News . . . .	3
Seren's Serenity Prayer . . . . .	4
Rats and Roses . . . . .	5
Arbitrary Violence, Determined Courage. . . . .	6
Dancing to the End of the Song. . . .	7
Take A Bow—Jeanne Guy . . . . .	8
Share A Good Book . . . . .	9
True Words: Change of Direction. . . .	10
Circles: Circling Together . . . . .	19
Interview With Gail Straub . . . . .	20
Members In Print & The News. . . . .	22
Contribute to the Anthology . . . . .	23
True Words: Looking Ahead. . . . .	24



April 13-15, 2012

Our 2012 Stories from the Heart conference offers you even more opportunities to hone your writing skills. Building on the success of Kendra Bonnett and Matilda Butler's Writing Alchemy workshop in 2010, the duo will lead a follow-on workshop designed to help you create a strong and effective story structure. And Jeanne Guy will offer her "Re-Story Circle," a writing/exploring/conversation process that will help you discover the power you have in creating your life.

Two exciting approaches to lifestory, three inspiring teachers. Enrollment in both workshops is limited, so sign up early.

More information on page 3.

## About Our Award Winning Authors:

**Marlene Samuels** earned her M.A. and Ph.D. at University of Chicago in the Social Sciences. She's an independent sociologist and writer whose interests include adoption issues, the changing American family, and regrets and subsequent decisions during life's key transition points. When not researching or writing sociology, she focuses on creative non-fiction, memoir, and teaching research methodology courses for writers of non-fiction.

Presently, she's working on a collection of short stories. In addition to her writing, Marlene is co-host of a culinary website and blog, [www.expendableedibles.com](http://www.expendableedibles.com).

At age thirteen, **Susan Flemr** felt called to be a pastor, but her denomination did not allow women to be ordained at that time. Before she was able to do so, at age fifty-eight, she worked in a variety of vocations: visiting nurse, school health nurse, and hospital chaplain in Chicago and several cities in Iowa. Recently retired, Susan spends time writing personal essays and enjoys volunteering in community theater. She and her husband Bill live in Fairfield Bay, Arkansas. They have two grown sons.

**Nancilynn Saylor** grew up in an Air Force family of seven living in many states and several foreign countries. She settled in Texas and moved to the Central Texas area in 1976. She raised 2 sons and helped raise a step-son. While always an avid reader and private poetess, she resumed writing after taking The Artist's Way Course; a gift to her after the death of her oldest son. She works full-time as a Patient Advocate in a large medical system and lives with her Romeo and two small dogs in Austin, where they garden when the weather permits and enjoy their grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

**Stephanie Dalley** has been living amongst the redwoods in Northern California for the past 20 years; prior to that she was born and raised in New York and New Jersey. Ms. Dalley has worked with women and children who have been victims of violence as a victim advocate. The passion she puts into each case, working with each client, she now puts into her writing.

Read their stories on pages 4-7

## Letter From SCN's President—



### On and Afghans and Editors: Why Writing is not for the Faint of Heart

If you are a knitter or crocheter, you know that mistakes are inevitable, and that once you've made one it can be tempting to let it slide in the name of progress. Those rows represent an investment of time—life energy—and it's unpleasant to have to unravel them back to the spot where you

knitted when you should have purled. But good knitters know that un-knitting is just part of the game.

I've done both—fixed mistakes and let them be. I used to justify the latter with something I'd read about the Navajo always leaving an intentional mistake in their weavings and sand paintings out of the belief that creating something too perfect would make the spirits jealous. Consequently, I have an afghan draped over my La-Z-Boy which has an interesting and impressive pattern that looks difficult but is actually quite simple. If you look a little closer, however, it becomes obvious there are places where I miscounted and chose not to fix it. At the time, I convinced myself that these little flaws weren't noticeable enough to warrant undoing. Now I regret that decision. If I'd been a little more patient (not one of my strong points) I'd have something that not only kept me warm but which gave me a real sense of accomplishment. The effort of correcting my mistakes, staving off the quite natural frustration with deconstruction, would only add to my feeling of pride because I would know how tempted I was to be sloppy. Conquering the temptation would be part of the victory.

The same is true of writing. When you are beginning (whether you are a beginning writer or a writer beginning a new piece), it is important to put down whatever pops into your head and not try to edit too soon. But there comes a time to look more closely; to reorder events so they make more sense; and to chop away mercilessly at extraneous words, phrases and ideas which interrupt the flow.

This process can be quite painful. It is distressing how many pages of raw writing are simply bad. Any published author will tell you that she threw away at least as many pages as she published. But that doesn't make it any easier when you are contemplating your own errors in judgment. Like the row upon row of miscounted stitches, those words represent effort and time. As writers, we become very attached to our choice of words, so it can be especially hard to gain the necessary perspective to fix it. Yet fixing it is the only way our writing will not only serve its purpose (communication, entertainment, persuasion) but do so in an especially pleasing way. Writing well isn't just some talent that drops down from heaven without effort. It takes hard work—hard because we have to do a lot of it and because we

must be ruthless in the editing process. It is the reason people call writing an art *and* a craft.

The parallels are not exact, of course. For one thing, mistakes in a piece of knitting are pretty obvious and we don't need help to see them. The same is not true of our writing. Read the opening acknowledgements in any book and you will find a long list of people who helped the author gain that perspective: friends, writing colleagues, family members and editors. Authors frequently use birth analogies when describing the process of taking a book out of their heads and putting it into print. If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes another to write a good book. We need all kinds of help. At first we need an uncritical audience, a story circle that will nurture that embryonic idea until it starts to resemble whatever it is supposed to become. But eventually we need someone more objective, a good editor.

I've read many self-published books and have found that the bad books have one thing in common—inadequate editing. I'm not just talking about proofreading. Typos are annoying but usually not deadly. But a plot that is outrageous and unbelievable, a character who doesn't talk like a real person, clichés and inconsistent descriptions—all these can overshadow a good imagination and kill a book before the pages peel out of the printer. Editors may seem expensive, but I wouldn't rush into print without one any more than I would give birth in a shack in a secluded woods without an experienced doctor or midwife.

Story Circle Network offers that village—circles of women who can give you a heartfelt hurrah and teachers, editors and critics who can help you hone your talent. We need both. It's the only way our writing will be imaginative without becoming loony and beautiful instead of merely adequate.

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, websites, classes, workshops, writing and reading circles, and woman-focused programs. Our activities empower women to tell their stories, discover their identities through their stories and choose to be the authors of their own lives.

It's Back! For Members Only



STORY CIRCLE  
JOURNAL  
E-EXTRA!

Online Only, at:

[www.storycircle.org/members/e-extra.shtml](http://www.storycircle.org/members/e-extra.shtml)

## Story Circle Journal

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

Editor: Robin Wittig  
 journaleditor@storycircle.org

### Contributing Editors:

Mary Jo Doig  
 Dani Greer  
 Lisa Shirah-Hiers  
 Susan Ideus  
 Susan Albert  
 Robin Edgar  
 Barbara Miller

We welcome your letters, queries, and suggestions.

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

© 2011 Story Circle Network  
 Copyrights to all contributed works remain with the authors.

### Membership Rates

One Year \$45 US  
 \$55 Canada and Mexico  
 \$60 elsewhere

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

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

**Missed Issues:** We try to ensure that *Story Circle Journal* arrives in your mailbox four times a year. If you miss an issue, send us a note and we'll mail you a replacement.

**Change of address:** If you move, please tell us.



**Matilda Butler & Kendra Bonnett**

**Pre-Conference Workshop**

## **It's 10 pm, Do You Know Where Your Story Is?**

Do you get so involved in the mechanics of writing that your true story gets lost? Do you worry about story structure but aren't sure how to develop, much less follow, one that is appropriate for your story? You want to write from your heart and tell your story. Yet, just like a house without a strong foundation and frame, the elements of your writing—character development, emotional expression, sensory description, strong dialogue, and time and place—may collapse under their own weight without a well-designed and executed framework for your memoir.

In our pre-conference workshop, we'll arm you with a powerful set of tools, techniques and devices to build a framework for your writing that will let the meaning of your story shine through. We call our simple, seven-step process Structural Alchemy™.

Let's play the Build-A-Story Game: Memoir-Writing Edition and in the process have fun building our memoirs by mixing and matching the components of a well-structured story. You'll play, write and share in this workshop.

As a bonus, you'll leave with an extra copy of our Build-A-Story Game that you can share with your writing group or writing friends. Come join us for an afternoon of story structure fun that will prepare you to successfully frame your memoir.

### **Jeanne Guy Pre-Conference Workshop**

## **The Power of Your Story: Rethink, Reframe, Re-Story Your Life**

What would it feel like to explore your life's possibilities, have your story be heard without judgment, and practice deep listening? A Re-Story Circle is a safe structure for such deep conversation, and for generating ideas through writing prompts to "re-story" your life. A Re-Story Circle is a place where you can feel nurtured, supported and empowered—in community.

Re-storying means looking at your life, your story, as it is currently constituted and reframing it. Journal writing is the tool we use to open up a dialogue with your Wise Voice, who could care less about your writing and more about you knowing who you already are.

The Circle Process will help you:

- Create new possibilities
- Remember what's important
- Remember to celebrate your life
- Be a mess
- Do what you can do
- Do what you think you cannot do (credit: Michael Bungay Stanier, Coach)

Jeanne uses Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea's Circle process (*The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair*), as the framework for her Re-Story Circles. The Circle is an energetic social container capable of helping a group draw on wellsprings of insight, information and story that inspire collective wisdom and action. Re-Story Circles rely on that social container of collective wisdom, but with the objective of inspiring individual growth through reframing of your life's story using journal writing prompts and deep conversation.

Join Jeanne as she leads us on an exploration of self-discovery to help us all rethink, reframe and re-story our lives. In addition to participating, writing, sharing and growing, you will also receive free a copy of "Re-Story Circle Guidelines" to help you practice and share this process in your own life with others.

**Visit: [www.storycircle.org/Conference/](http://www.storycircle.org/Conference/)**



## Seren's Serenity Prayer

by Marlene Samuels,  
Chicago IL

“What a waste!” my mother complained. “I rinse the dishes, load, then unload. I could have just washed them and be done with it!” Her rant focused upon the dishwasher my father presented her—a Mother’s Day surprise. Yet, when life’s difficulties intervened, her true self emerged: a pragmatist and survivor possessing boundless courage. Her diminutive size belied the stamina and cunning that lurked inside. To her clients, she was an elegant woman possessed of quick humor and remarkable dressmaking talent.

Three days before she died, my mother, Seren Tuvel, gave me the only knick-knack she ever displayed at her dressmaking salon. She was slipping away from me, perched on the divide between life and death, frail as a fledgling swallow encountering its first breeze. Her gift: a wooden box painted to resemble an antiqued book. Within its covers, a poignant message was printed in flowing script upon a background of Renaissance angels.

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.” The Serenity Prayer (Reinhold Niebuhr)

Growing up, I heard tales of Seren’s courage from her old European friends, recounted with great relish at holiday gatherings, weddings and Bar Mitzvahs. There also was incredible courage I witnessed as her daughter. A single theme ran like a raging river through her life—moral strength manifest as intense courage.

Three decades have passed since my mother died. I now comprehend the significance of The Serenity Prayer in her life. It gradually worked its way into mine. Seren was, by anyone’s standards, remarkably courageous and determined—a woman whose influence upon me surfaces when life’s challenges stump me.

My mother embraced courage as her life’s philosophy. “Live courageously. No matter what, trust heart. What you know to be the truth will feed courage. Otherwise, how can you live with yourself?”

It was her mantra—one she recited to me during my teens and into my stressful twenties, a decade filled with career dilemmas, graduate school challenges and perplexing romances.

I sat on her hospital bed. There were so many unanswered questions I had about my mother. I was 33, newly married. She was 65. “Mom, when the Nazis rounded up Jews in Bucharest,” I asked, “many Jews converted to Catholicism, so why didn’t you? It might have saved you from being sent to the camps.”

Her response was unemotional, clear-cut even and her Romanian accent imparted an exotic quality to her voice. “You live your beliefs because you must live with your conscience. Now I’m asking you; if I’d become a Catholic, I’d have been a dishonest Jew and a dishonest Catholic. What would be left in my soul?”

Seren grew up deep within the Carpathian Mountains before World War II. Her father, Avraham, managed a lumber mill, the only local business other than farming. Her family was among the twenty Jewish ones in the remote village. That statistic rendered her vulnerable and conspicuous.

Even as a girl, she was determined and courageous. During the daily two-mile hike home from their Catholic school, Seren protected her two younger sisters from impending danger. One day, bullying peasant boys launched anti-Semitic taunts, along with mud rockets and stones. Seren stunned them all. Retaliating with her own bombardment of rocks collected along the way, she chased down the largest boy, unleashing upon him her full fury. Their walks became uneventful.

An intellectually gifted student, Seren went loggerheads with her pious, old-fashioned father. Each discussion about her educational goals yielded his customary retort. “No daughter of mine will leave home except with a husband. Enough, end of discussion!” Avraham resumed reading his German newspaper.

“But papa, there’s a regional scholarship contest. The student with the highest scores wins a full scholarship to Gymnasium! I want to try, please?” She persisted. She was fourteen years old. “Papa, please?”

“Seren, forget this foolishness! What girl needs university to have children, to cook, to sew? Concentrate on finding a good husband.”

Against her father’s wishes, her mother as her collaborator, Seren secretly entered the competition. It was the third decade of the twentieth century. With anti-Semitism and pogroms rampant throughout Eastern Europe and fearing reprisals, only five Jewish children arrived for exams—Seren the only girl.

The following Sabbath, her large family gathered for breakfast after synagogue. Seren burst into the expansive kitchen, letter in hand. “Papa, Papa, look! I won the scholarship to school in Bucharest!”

Avraham slammed his cup on the table, bellowing, “I forbid you to go! You’d have to live away in a dormitory among non-Jews. You think you can hide what you are? I say you won’t go!”

“I will go!” Seren was the only child who ever challenged Avraham.

“You defy me? I won’t have it. If you go, don’t come home!” And she went.

My mother’s goal vanished shortly after classes began. Her temper erupting as her teacher issued anti-Semitic remarks, she lobbed her ink bottle at his head and promptly withdrew from school. But she refused to admit defeat to her father by returning home. Instead she traveled to Bucharest. Disembarking the train in unfamiliar territory, Seren went shop to shop searching for a dressmaking apprenticeship. She was hired that day and her life changed forever.

Seren’s educational failure led her to a talent that became the basis for her future. Her new skills positioned her to survive in the ghetto by finding work. It was the mechanism by which she survived the war—succeeding in keeping one of her sisters and two close friends alive,

and ensuring her group's usefulness in Dachau. In post-war Germany few survivors found work but she did. Immigrating to Canada with her husband and new baby—a distant foreign land where she knew no one, had no job, spoke no English, she again proved courageous.

Her courage to change course and challenge social conventions proved indispensable over her entire life. Her journey spanned Nazi occupied Europe, Dachau concentration camp, years in post-war Germany, and in her meeting my father. As a skilled worker, she gained entry to Canada—a haven for Holocaust survivors. Seren's courage led to financial stability and finally, to our family gaining USA immigration visas.

By her own admission, my mother failed her educational endeavors yet succeeded her quest for independence while saving numerous lives. For those dependent on her, Seren's courage was the difference between life and death. During difficult times, I still ask, "What would Seren do?" or "If she were here, what would she suggest?"

Before my mother slid out of life, her rabbi asked, "Do you regret anything you did during the war? You know so many survivors do."

"Not one thing!" She replied. "I lived more life than I'd ever imagined. You know, I made a good life from nothing that was left after the war. To me, it's exactly like taking a plain piece of fabric and making it into a beautiful suit. The most important thing I did? I kept my courage and lived morally at a time when so many others abandoned all values."

Seren Tuvel, my mother, was an embodiment of courage!



## Rats and Roses

by Susan Flemer, Fairfield Bay AR



*For Margaret (Maggie) Johnson*

Nothing frightened me more than the sound of a scurrying rat in a darkened apartment hallway, as I picked my way over worn carpeting or uneven flooring. Under my breath I'd curse the negligent landlord who failed to replace light bulbs, and I'd force myself to move forward. Often I couldn't do it and would hurry back toward the entrance and the light.

When I failed in my first attempt to enter a building, I knew I would eventually have to reenter. My work as a visiting nurse in one of Chicago's poorest neighborhoods forced me there. Living behind one of the apartment doors inside would be a patient who needed my care. However, the rats, admittedly the size of squirrels, had grown in my mind's eye with each harrowing confrontation. They were becoming obstacles to my work. I despised the power they were gaining over me as my phobia grew.

In one such rat-infested building I visited Maggie Johnson. Bedridden with terminal cancer, she had raised her three children alone after her husband died in a factory accident. The apartment

had been the family home for years. Maggie told me, "My daughter Evie said, 'Mama, just come and live with us now.'" Maggie refused. "I want Evie to enjoy these years with her husband and children without me as a burden," she said. She looked forward to their visits and especially enjoyed her grandchildren.

I knew my visits three times a week to assist her with her bath, oversee her medication, and provide other nursing care were also important times for her. Those visits became important to me as well. Maggie had rich stories to share—colorful tales of her childhood in Mississippi and her travels to "Yankee territory," as she referred to Chicago.

By the time I began visiting her, Maggie moved very little, her arms and legs impossibly thin, the muscles atrophied from disuse. Her cheeks were sunken and her black skin stretched tightly over the bones in her tiny body. She ate small amounts and frequently said that food wasn't necessary, as she would be dying soon. I didn't try to deny her innate sense of life's approaching end.

The three-room apartment had bare wood floors and only a few pieces of furniture. Maggie had given the rest to Evie. "I'm so happy they have some use for what George and I liked," she told me. It was apparent she took pride in what remained—her single bed, her nightstand with a lamp, one dresser, a kitchen table and four chairs, and pictures of family members on the walls. Her daughter carefully dusted each item every week.

Bright white starched curtains hung on the window beside the bed. "I placed my bed right here so I could watch the maple tree," she told me one day. "That tree is one of the beautiful things George and I didn't have in Mississippi. The seasons." From her white cotton gown, sheets and spread, to the gray floors and furniture, to the black iron bed frame, she looked to that vibrant green tree for lively contrast.

One day, as I prepared to change the catheter that drained the urine from her bladder, she casually told me a rat had finally eaten through the wall in her kitchen three days before and was now loose in the place. Though just beginning a delicate procedure requiring my utmost concentration, I wanted to run from the apartment.

As I attempted to concentrate on my task and keep up a lively conversation to distract Maggie from any discomfort, I kept hearing "loose in the place" over and over in my mind. My heart raced and my hands perspired and shook in the sterile gloves. My knees were rubber.

"The city housing guys are supposed to bring a trap big enough to catch the rat later today sometime. I'll really be glad." Maggie laughed as she reassured herself with this bit of information. But it wasn't doing much to reassure me.

"I've been pretty scared of that rat," she said. "Scared that he might just decide to climb up in this bed here and bite me. I can't run anywhere to get away from him, you know." I glanced up to find her staring through her thin bent knees, directly at me. She used every bit of effort to raise her head off the pillow so that our eyes could meet. I knew she could sense my fear.

"Take a deep breath, Maggie," I advised, and she complied. I breathed in with her and gently inserted the catheter. We exhaled together and she laid her head back against the pillow, but only momentarily.

"Look right over there on that dresser," she said, lifting her head. "See those silk roses that my friends brought in a beautiful vase? My daughter put a dish of poison on that dresser beside the vase. It's supposed to kill rats. Well, it doesn't work. The rat eats it like candy and nothing happens."

Done with the procedure, I started to straighten up when Maggie blurted out, "Look, Nurse Sue! The rat is eating there now! Go ahead . . . look!" I turned toward the dresser. A large gray rat sat on his haunches munching poison feed from a cereal bowl.

I felt dizzy. My heart raced faster. Maggie giggled. "Bet you didn't think you'd get this kind of entertainment today, did you?"

"No, I didn't," I managed to whisper.

Then she spoke words I remember always. "Nurse Sue. When we look over there right now we can focus on that rat, or we can focus on those roses—gifts of love—behind him. We've got to look past the fear to get to the love sometimes. When it's dark at night and I can hear that thing scratching and chewing, that's when I focus on the roses, on the love. Then the fear goes away and I can breathe again."

She lowered her head back into the pillow and reached out for my hand. "I think when you come back that old rat will be trapped, but I know you'll come anyway, won't you?"



## Arbitrary Violence, Determined Courage

by Stephanie Dalley, Forestville CA

Where to start? If this story was a film, I could see the scenes as they appear and fade. Maybe I can paint the scenes with language, so you'll see them, too.

I open my eyes to bright lights, lots of noise, and Nurse Ratchet standing over me, checking my IV. I sense in a moment that she is not one bit soft or compassionate; her eyes avoid mine. At the end of the stretcher, I sense someone else. Squinting, I see the biggest barrel of a policeman I have ever seen, notepad in his hands, scribbling something. He, too, avoids direct eye contact with me. Why? What is this?

I surrender to darkness. I am trapped—the car door won't open. I try desperately to grab the sawed-off stub of the door lock, the jagged edges ripping into my fingers. But it's too late. He is out of the car, and yanks the door open, catches me by the back of my neck as I try to escape.

Now I'm in my apartment. There's a policewoman here to take photos of my bruises. This takes several hours: shot after shot of my exposed breasts, legs, buttocks, and face. As bad as I looked in the hospital three days ago, I now look worse, as if someone had painted my body black and blue.

I come to awareness screaming, unsure if I'm having another nightmare, or if it's the pain I'm experiencing as the nurses try to pull out the gravel embedded in my face, my head, my chest. God, make them stop! It is enough!

I beg him, "Please, take my jewelry, my purse, my money." I tell him, "I will do anything, but please don't hurt me," as his foot comes up to viciously kick me in the chest. He is only pleased by violence, and more violence.

My angel (she would laugh if she knew I called her that) steps around the curtain in the ER. Her experienced eyes observe the nurses attacking my body with their tweezers, laughing as they compete for who can collect the most gravel, and the two police officers looming over me in the tiny cubicle. "Out," she says to everyone. My angel Marie is a retired sea captain, now a Victim's Advocate. They all leave, finally.

That abandoned lot—how did we get here? He kicks, punches, pummels, and drags me across broken concrete, dirt and gravel. I raised up and tried to run—so many times—only to be slammed down again.

Marie looks anything but soft and gentle; but she's the one who finally holds my hand, makes eye contact, and tells me what happened. Her soft voice tells how I've come to be here, that a night watchman in a factory nearby heard me screaming when he came out for a smoke break. He called the police, and within minutes, lights and sirens brought officers from two districts to that place of pain and terror. She tells me that my assailant was so compelled by his violence that he never stopped beating me until the cops tackled him.

I am being released from the hospital. Marie will transport me, and friends will stay with me. The police are holding my purse and its contents for evidence. "I cannot go home. I am afraid he will find me and kill me this time. I cannot go home. The police have my keys—they say they are evidence..."

We are in the courtroom. Marie picked me up this morning. We had to stop on the way so I could throw up my breakfast on the sidewalk. "I cannot go into that courtroom and face him." Marie says in her soft, strong, quiet lion's voice, "Yes, we can".

We do this often. We go back and forth to court. Twice, his lawyers quit. The photos of my face alone are quite compelling—and how could you possibly represent that man? I want to quit, too. I cannot do this. It is too hard. It is too much. The detectives have found two other women who have been assaulted by him, but it is my testimony they need. I know that if I don't testify, he will kill the next one he attacks. I hang on.

Now it is nine months later, and we are once again in court. I sit on the bench waiting. My back hurts, as it often does in a woman's final days of pregnancy. But this is his sentencing date; he will go away now, and I will never see him again. I can't miss this court date. The child too will go; I have struggled with this decision for some time. This heartbreak doesn't ever seem to end for me. I know the adoptive family will be good to him—I don't know if I could be.

I am against the idea of therapy; why would I want to relive that horrible nightmare? I know for sure I can't do it. But as the days go by, I realize I really can't not do it. The trauma specialist gently works with me week after painful week. Slowly I begin to find my way back. For so long there was no hope, but now...I find hope again.

It's four years later and I start work with Marie, I've been to the Junior College and taken some classes, I have passion for this work. Marie mentors me, and I become a Court Advocate for women who are victims of violent crime. I learn how the court system works, how to do a good interview, how to get a

restraining order. What I think to myself is that I get to help put the bad guys away. I work for years. I work with women and children who have been victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. I serve on panels with local law enforcement, to help improve the responses to 911 calls made by those victims.

I learn a lot. I feel good about what I do. It feels like a gift now instead of a curse, this ability to hold a woman's hand, look into her eyes and say "I understand." I am telling her the truth. I really understand. I have transformed the violence I survived into compassion.



## Dancing to the End of the Song

by Nancilynn Saylor, Austin TX



When I was 23  
a new Mom with a  
young toddler and an infant  
fresh born,  
strange things began to happen with my  
body.

Actually, strange things began to happen  
a few years earlier  
but I ignored them-  
or found a way to  
explain them away.  
When you live in a downtown  
Ft.Worth commune  
and weird things happen,  
You sort of  
just go with-the-flow.  
My feet would go to sleep  
taking soon  
my legs  
and hips with them.  
Nothing is worse than having part of you  
asleep  
and the rest of you wondering  
what the hell is going on?  
I would walk the streets of  
Cow town, night after night  
no feeling, apart from numbness,  
in my lower extremities.

Another year or so  
later on,  
they, the misbehaving legs, started to  
twitch  
followed quickly by what I called  
"the cattle prod"  
that zipped briefly  
up my back and twitched my  
entire self...zap "it" got me!

The next year new oddities!  
When I would wake up in the morning  
Get out of the bed and fall flat on my face  
on the floor  
Now, not just numbness  
But none-ness  
No feeling in my legs!

The inability to get up  
And fear of what was happening  
Kept me still  
So as not to wake my sleeping son  
Thankfully, that only occurred a  
handful of times  
Brushed away  
because I must be strong...  
Must be fatigue from working  
11-7 shift and then being Mommy  
in the morning  
to my golden boy who had  
slept all night with the sitter  
or grandparents  
while I explored hospital work  
The ER- where all the excitement  
happened  
in a Texas college town.  
Not a nurse  
But finally working in a hospital  
and no needles involved  
in my typewriter.  
OK.

occasional numbness and none-ness  
accompanied by the twitching  
electric shock events.

Through it all, I remained  
the queen of  
denial...  
Fabulous!  
Now I am pregnant again!

The excitement of expecting  
drove all the nagging  
numb, tingling, jittering and twitching  
to some faraway file, deep in my brain's  
hard drive  
and there it all remained for  
a blissful eight months.  
One morning  
while holding my precious  
new auburn haired son,  
feeding him his bottle,  
I noticed that my arm  
was "going to sleep"

all tingly and strangely  
suggestive of those  
leg annoyances of the earlier years.  
Oh great...the arm brought with it  
Shoulder tingling,  
Visual anomalies and  
then, the electric shock returned.  
The denial ended replaced by  
trips to doctors.  
Tests and more tests ensued;  
more needles and sticks  
than I could ever have imagined.  
Uh oh!  
We think we see something in your eyes!!  
Into the hospital you go...  
They waved my brain  
and they tapped my spine  
They said  
"You have MS"  
I said" so what"  
There is no cure...  
What does that mean?

"You will never dance at your children's  
weddings..."  
They cleverly avoided words like"  
crippled and wheelchair."  
(I discovered those things much later on my  
own.)

First I cried and then I laughed,  
and laughed and laughed:  
"I have danced my entire life  
and slipped and tripped into lakes and  
rivers from Alaska to Texas and  
exotic foreign countries.  
When I leave this place this morning  
I could get hit by a bus!!"

It is all in your attitude I decided!  
I raised and married off my sons  
and never passed up a chance  
to dance!  
When I was 45  
I danced at my parent's 50th wedding  
celebration.



## Take A Bow! Spotlighting Our Volunteers

# Jeanne Guy

by Robin A. Edgar

2012 Volunteer & Pre-Conference  
Workshop Presenter



Jeanne Guy credits longtime SCN member and friend, Leilani Rose, for getting her involved with SCN back in 2003. Jeanne became a Board member in 2009 and currently serves as chair for Be Our Guest events. She has also served as a judge for numerous Story Circle writing contests. Involved in SCN's Stories From the Heart biannual conference in many capacities, she has presented numerous conference workshops; was Volunteer Coordinator for the 2010 conference; and will be presenting a pre-conference workshop—"The Power of Your Story: How to Re-Story Your Life"—as well as serving as Program Chair for the 2012 conference.

Born a Hoosier, Jeanne graduated from Indiana University with a major in English Literature and a minor in Drama. The youngest, with a much-older sister and brother, she says she felt like she had the best of both worlds—an only child, yet with siblings. After surviving the terror of the kidnapping of her older two children by their father, she moved to Austin, Texas in 1982 with her second husband, three kids, and a host of other family members.

"Picture the Clampetts moving to Beverly Hills and you'll catch my drift," she quips.

While Jeanne was working as a program associate at the Seton Cove spirituality center, Leilani Rose participated in Jeanne's "Your Life is Your Art: You are the Artist!" workshop (based on Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*). When SCN invited Christina Baldwin to facilitate SCN's 2008 LifeLines Retreat, Leilani helped arrange Baldwin's events for the Cove.

"SCN and Christina Baldwin have been in my life ever since, and Leilani and I are still buds," says Jeanne.

Attracted to SCN's mission, quality of workshops and connection with other writers, Jeanne joined Austin's Reading Circle. She says reading memoirs and hearing her fellow reading circle women's stories has helped her immensely with her own writing.

"We're a great group of diverse women who read a memoir a month and share in the facilitating of a discussion about the book, the author, and the writing. We also share related stories of our lives, which helps us all grow," she says.

In addition to a successful 25-year career in administrative office management and business development, Jeanne brings her expertise as an educator and writer for over 15 years to her duties as Program Chair. As Chair, she hopes to offer conference attendees meaningful experiences and valuable information. As a board member, she intends to offer support to the mission and vision of SCN and make time to eat and party with its members, too.

"We want those who attend to keep coming back," she says.

When she is not devoting her time to her board and program chair duties, Jeanne loves her teaching work with Jeanne Guy Workshops. Calling herself the "Great Self-Proclaimed Re-Story Expert," she is currently creating, planning and facilitating Re-Story Circles. Known for her irreverent sense of humor and dry wit, Jeanne is passionate about helping participants explore and change their lives through the power of journal writing and deep conversation in Circle.

Currently, Jeanne is writing "*Gone: A Memoir*" the story of how her children were stolen from her and how she stole them back. She says that her beloved critique group, along with her husband, Robert and close friends, are helping her become a good writer—"kicking and screaming," she says with a smile. In spite of all of her workshop and writing commitments, she still makes time to power walk, journal, read, research and experience life, and spend time with family, friends, cats and most importantly, her husband.

She says, "In my former life, I managed architects. Now I'm married to one and need all the help I can get. Applying the re-story principles keeps us honest and committed. We're not looking to have any elephants in the room!"

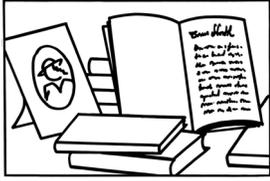
Jeanne's children are now grown, with kids and dogs of their own (she offers pictures of granddaughters and "granddogs" upon request). She values and appreciates her new marriage of almost seven years to her old friend of 28 years.

"I have a good crazy life," she laughs and adds, "It's my goal to hear people say, 'That woman is weird but she does seem to be enjoying herself.'"

To learn more about Jeanne and her work, go to [www.jeanneguy.com](http://www.jeanneguy.com).

"If you want a better life, it's time  
to write a better story."

~Jeanne Guy



## Story Circle Network's Book Reviews

# Share a Good Book

by Susan Ideus

At StoryCircleBookReviews, we always receive more wonderful books than we can possibly review. So we've created a new feature on our website: a section called *Briefly Reviewed*, a selection of titles, briefly described, that represent the wide range of recently-published memoirs written by strong women who have been there, done that, and lived to tell the tale. Recommended! Visit the new section here: [www.storycirclebookreviews.org/briefly.shtml](http://www.storycirclebookreviews.org/briefly.shtml)

Speaking of great numbers of books, I recently heard an excellent piece on NPR about collecting books that caused me to think about my relationship with the books I own. How do you feel?

"I believe in buying books you can't really afford. I'm not advocating fiscal irresponsibility, but if you're going to make a big purchase, why not make it a book?" So says Kristin Kelly in a recent NPR *This I Believe* oral essay titled *Books at Any Cost*. (<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/68795/>) Such a lover of books is Ms. Kelly that she still owns a 1970s television set, content to be entertained by her books instead. And while she does make use of libraries as a reader and as a college professor, she says "...I know that there is something mysterious and spiritual in owning your own good books, in spending your earthly money for a piece of heavenly art to pass down to future generations to say: This is what I loved. And I wonder if you will love, it too?" Spoken like a true bibliophile! I have two grown daughters who could happily fit into such a household. Indeed, they are each lovingly building their own personal book collections. They, along with Ms. Kelly, might appreciate this sentiment as well:

Tough choices face the biblioholic at every step of the way—like choosing between reading and eating, between buying new clothes and buying books, between a reasonable lifestyle and one of penurious but masochistic happiness lived out in the wallow of excess.—Tom Raabe, *Biblioholism: The Literary Addiction*

Now, I do love reading. Anyone who knows even a little bit about me knows that. I always have my nose in a book. I'm

addicted to reading. Can't imagine my life without it. I also own many books. I love beautiful books, finely crafted books, lovely old books. However, I don't collect them, in the sense of a true bibliophile as mentioned above. I don't have shelves of classics, and I have only a few books that I keep because I might re-read them. Included are some reference books that I keep close as I write.

*The books on my shelves at any given time reflect who I am at that point in my life. One of Ms. Kelly's statements really resonates with me: "Good books age with you; they bend and flex with your life experiences." Those experiences determine the contents of my bookshelves.*

When I first married, I began collecting cookbooks. Thirty-odd years ago, I had a big collection on babies and parenting. Next came shelves of crafting and sewing books, followed by parenting again—teenagers this time around. I then circled back around to cookbooks, a little more on the gourmet and inventive level. In the last few years, my shelves have filled with books on writing and memoir. Through it all, I've had a current selection of novels of varied genre, current bios and memoirs, and other books which piqued my interest at the time. As my interests have changed and evolved, I've given books to libraries, churches, shelters, friends and family. Good books should be used and shared, in my opinion.

When I think of all the books still left for me to read, I am certain of further happiness. —Jules Renard

*Where do you find yourself on this spectrum from dedicated bibliophile to avid reader/book lover?*

## Our Volunteers Keep Us Going!

SCN is grateful to our many volunteers, who have contributed over **2,792 hours** this year! Thank You!

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

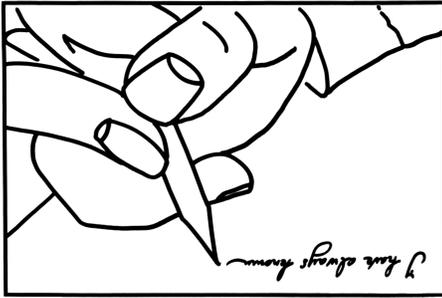
## SCN's LifeWriters Group



The SCN LifeWriters Group on Yahoo.com boasts 120 members, many who post more than one message a week. This group is very active, and you can join the conversation.

## Join Us

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



## True Words from Real Women

# Change of Direction

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

### Changing My Life's Direction

Samantha M. White, Ashland MA  
[www.someonetotalktothebook.com](http://www.someonetotalktothebook.com)

I was in my fifties, divorced, a bereaved mother, in my first year of social work graduate school, rebuilding myself from shards, needing to honor my daughter's too-short life.

I had wanted to do hospice work since before my marriage crashed, since before my daughter was killed.

Years ago my cousin and then two of my closest friends had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. They had each wanted to spend their final days at home, dying as gracefully and comfortably as possible, but hospice was not yet available. I spent afternoons with Steve as he gallantly lived out his days surrounded by his family. I visited with Anne every week, holding her hand as her strength ebbed and her body shrank, and she told me she knew she wouldn't live to her fiftieth birthday, only a month away. I was part of Barry's caregiving team, bringing him dinner on Thursday nights and staying until his son arrived at bedtime. We talked about life, our shared struggles, and his memories, while he slowly died, in relative comfort at home, for a year and a half.

Accompanying them through their final days taught me much about courage and acceptance, and the value of having someone to talk to at a lonely and frightening time of life. My memories of those precious last weeks and tender farewells were warm and loving, and I wanted to make that rich experience part of my life's work.

My part-time job that year was in a medical building connected to a hospital. One day, on the elevator going down to the cafeteria, I introduced myself to the Director of the Hospice Program and asked for an appointment to talk. Two days later, in his office, I said, "I'll be needing an internship next year, and I'd like to do it in your program."

"We've never had an intern," he said, "but I like the idea. I'll see whether we can't come up with something for you."

Two weeks later my new internship materialized.

I was steering my life in the direction of my goal.

(Excerpted and adapted from the author's book: *Someone To Talk To: Finding Peace, Purpose, and Joy After Tragedy and Loss*, ©2011)

### Pandora's Box

Caroline Ziel, St. Louis MO

"You were in the convent weren't you?" I was glued to the passenger door clutching a book: *How to Stay a Virgin*. I had just left the Precious Blood Sisters and was beginning an adventure called "men."

The Pope had recently challenged religious to consider whether we had a "true vocation." Obedience had never been my forte. Chastity confused me. What value would a vow of chastity have if I'd only had contact with male relatives and the confessional priest? Eventually, I was given a gentle invitation to try the "world" for two years and then return for the novitiate. When Pope John opened the windows of change for the Church, he opened Pandora's box for me.

This box came in the guise of a military base. My mission was to learn about the foreign creatures known as men. If I were going to return in two years to take a vow of chastity, I should know what that meant. So instead of preparing to go to Africa to convert pagans I voyaged into an entirely different jungle.

I immediately joined the USO. What better way to rectify my ignorance than to entertain the troops? I traded my black half veil, thick stockings, and oxfords for hooped earrings, high heels, and sequins. Instead of a cotton bra and white t-shirt I found Victoria's Secret. I think that the push up bra and Cleopatra makeup confused soldiers. It certainly confused me. I looked hot to trot and ready to roll, but had as much life as a Barbie doll.

The next few months included cheek to cheek dancing with inebriated officers. My angels were the chaperones who enforced four-inch spaces between bodies, and kept mauling males at an even greater distance. What I learned that summer had more to do with myself than with men. Neither of us were a crash course. I never did return to the convent, continuing my studies in frequently colorful venues. I did become a hussy of sorts, but there was always an angel to reign me in. Some adventures are not worth the price.



## What Would I See?

Lisa Chretien, Salem OR

ladynora@aol.com, www.lisahasnolife.blogspot.com

r-ecircle1, w-ecircle9

If I were to Google Earth myself what would I see?  
 Would I see myself sitting here at my computer?  
 Would I see my house surrounded by fields and a small patch of forest?  
 Would I see Salem, Oregon bisected by I5 sitting along the Willamette River?  
 What would I see?  
 If I were to Google Earth my family what would I see?  
 Would I see the birth of my parents one born in Bottineau, North Dakota the other in Leland, Oregon?  
 Would I see them meet and then marry in Seattle, Washington?  
 Would I see them move west from Missouri to Oregon by car just after the end of WW II?  
 Would I see their first home on Dearborn Avenue in Keizer?  
 Would I see them journey to Portland, Oregon to St Vincent's Hospital to adopt me?  
 What would I see?  
 If I were to Google Earth my family what would I see?  
 Would I see my children grow up and drift away and then drift back?  
 What would I see?  
 If I were to Google Earth my family what would I see?  
 Would I see my two grandsons walking down the lane with my father between them, finally accepting them?  
 Would I see my daughter on the phone to me saying, "Mom I have something to tell you," and me knowing right away she was pregnant with grandchild number three, the first girl?  
 Would I see my second granddaughter being born, like her older sister, by c-section, like her mother and her uncle?  
 What would I see?  
 If I were to Google Earth myself, what would I see?

## Taking the Next Exit

Betsy Boyd, Maryville TN

"Whale," entreated the voice on the phone. "Ah can pay you mower to teach these three claysses than you can mayke substitute teachin' all year." She had a point. Yet my own just-uttered protests that, "I am a high school, not a college, teacher," caused me to hesitate. She used my pause to accelerate. "Would you at least be willin' to come to mah office on Monday to tawlk about it?" I relented. "Okay, how do I get there?" Her instructions were clear: "Take I-40 West from Knoxville and get off at the next exit after Brown Squirrel Furniture."

Usually when we take an exit off of an interstate, it is a purposeful act and we know what to expect: lunch at Cracker Barrel, a fill-up, or a cozy room for the night. Sometimes we get a surprise, like the time I was driving from Florida to Tennessee to visit my sister and a tire blew as I was leaving the highway. To my great relief, a full-service station was right next to the Hampton Inn where I'd planned to stay for the night. Thank goodness there was a safe place to land at the end of that exit ramp.

I didn't realize it when I took the next exit after Brown Squirrel Furniture the following Monday morning, but that move provided me with a safe place to land, too. By the time I'd reached Dr. Reynolds' office, I realized that she was right. Comfortable or not, since I'd moved to Tennessee without having first secured a high school teaching position, I needed to accept her offer to teach college students until I could get "a real job." I put it in drive and signed on the dotted line. That was twenty-three years ago. Since being hired that day, I have remained at Pellissippi State Community College, teaching writing and college success classes, directing a learning center, and, for the past thirteen years, counseling students to seek their own path.

Sometimes an exit ramp is just an exit ramp. Other times it's a byway to a new life.

## Change of Direction

Leia Francisco, Kerrville TN, lfrancisco@stx.rr.com, www.leiafrancisco.com

Not long ago, I fractured my leg. Badly. Me, the woman on the go: places and people to see, to-do's galore, flattened on the restaurant floor. How did this happen? I exercise, have strong bones, take multivitamins, live sensibly. I teach people about navigating transitions like changing careers, losing a loved one, moving to another city, but what, I wondered, could a broken, immobilized femur do except interrupt my plans and inconvenience me in multiple ways? It promised no potential for a new direction.

First came the surgical implant of a metal rod and then one-foot hopping with a walker. Next, I relearned the mechanics of walking, surrendering to the rule of physical therapists and the unfamiliar challenge of everyday tasks. I cancelled projects and trips, peeling away unessential activities so that my physical and emotional energy became fully intentional. Then one day, I couldn't find a way to retrieve a book I'd dropped. I realized at that moment that the universe had given me a stop sign.

This stopped life, much like any major transition, and sparked a life review. I had watched other patients face their own—sometimes permanent—physical limitations with courage and humor, and I began to see my own vulnerability as a signpost for wisdom. We all can wake each day with hopes for the smallest miracle. Until this injury, my life has been largely vertical, stacking things skyward, moving up the ladder of work. I know that the "letting go" is usually the hardest part of transitions. An accident threw me to the ground, where I began letting go. My vertical view expanded horizontally: horizons of sky, people's love, gratitude all around, and possibilities. As a result, I am charting a new course, closer to my writing and things of the heart. At some point, I might look back and find that, at the least, this was a break made lucky.

## Life Is Good

Janet Caplan, Sooke BC Canada

I assumed I'd still be working at this stage in my life. I'm a very youthful 61 and so why not? I liked what I did well enough and the money was just fine, too. But three years ago, at age 58 my direction changed. I quit, or maybe I simply retired early. However I choose to look at it, the decision was a great one: no second thoughts, not a single regret—well, maybe a bit more money might be nice but truly, not worth it.

As a self-employed bookkeeper for many years, I worked with many interesting people and in a great variety of businesses and professional offices. I always believed that it was this diversity that made what I did enjoyable. I never set out to be a bookkeeper; I certainly never felt passionate about it. It was merely something I fell into many years ago. As it turned out, I proved to be pretty good at it and I was never at a loss for clients.

When we moved to Vancouver Island six years ago, I found work fairly quickly. My plan, now that we were living in our dream location, was to work part-time and to enjoy myself the rest of the time. And so it went.

Not long into my association with my Vancouver Island client, it became obvious that I had become involved with a woman who couldn't keep her hands out of the books—literally. I'd do the work as per instructions and I'd come in the next day only to discover that she'd changed things. She'd apprise me of this and then tell me that, in fact, she thought the way I'd done it was preferable and that she'd like me to revise her entries. Over several months my frustration level rose. After fruitless discussion—she could do as she wished because it was her business and her prerogative—I decided to leave.

My husband and I talked. Life was so good, especially when I wasn't working. It was time to quit. We'd manage financially.

## Boomer Blues

Amy Greenspan, Austin TX

Our parents have grown ancient.  
Now we take on roles we never dreamed.  
Ah, why didn't we love them more  
when they were lucid, able to love back?  
Appreciate their strength  
when they could stand alone?  
Anticipate the wretched toll  
of getting old?

We thought that launching children  
was our challenge –  
once they leave home,  
life levels into ease.  
But no.  
Watching parents shrink is harder  
than watching children grow.

## The Big M

Diana Nolan, LaGrange TN, nolandiana@att.net

My mother and older aunt had a habit of conducting secret conversations in the darkened hallway off our living room. What an opportunity for us kids to eavesdrop! One day, I heard them whispering about, "the change." This sounded interesting, so I remained at my station. Then, in a reply I heard my aunt comment, "She's going through "the change," you know."

I canvassed my friends. No one in my fifth grade knew about this change. We thought perhaps it was a door of some kind. Indeed, it was. On becoming a teenager, I and my friends were focused on menstrual concerns not menopausal—that was for old women.

The state of menopause used to be wracked with superstition, ignorance, and fear. My own experience placed me in the category of ignorance. My change came with another change while I was working for a multi-national corporation and looking forward to leaving my job to enroll in full time classes at my local university to complete work on my B.A. My plans came to a halt the day my husband called from work to tell me his job and many others had been eliminated. Life was now uncertain. My plans went on hold. My always helpful Mom was living in Florida, too far from my home in Connecticut.

Within three weeks I was suffering from hot flashes (I diagnosed myself with walking pneumonia). Then heart palpitations arrived, and menses ceased. A friend mentioned menopause. How could that be? I was only 46 years old. I scoured the university library and found not a single book or article, except for one technical essay written by a male some twenty years earlier. When I finally visited my gynecologist, he offered little remedies or advice, except to confirm that I was indeed experiencing menopause.

I realized I was not likely to give birth, and had to admit I was aging (most disconcerting). This was a call for drastic action. With my new menopausal body I began open discussions with friends, acquired a new female physician, and enrolled in classes for the next semester.

## Change and Struggle

Jean D. Erler, Barrington RI

" I can be changed by what happens to me,  
But I refuse to be reduced by it,"  
Says Maya Angelou.  
Therein lies my struggle.  
I crave independence  
But need dependence to be safe.  
I crave my own home  
But need to live in someone else's.  
I crave money to buy my beloved books.  
But need now to live within my small means.  
I am being changed by these new circumstances.  
Every day I struggle not to be reduced by them.  
Which to choose: the ache of want, the sternness of need?  
Does my very struggle mean my ultimate reduction?  
I do not know.

## Love, Love, Love

Melanie Alberts, Austin TX

A year has gone since the boxes were flattened,  
rooms and contents printed in all caps on three sides.  
A year's gone since my dad stopped smoking; hell,  
stopped everything. His ashes were mailed to all the kids  
but I refused them—we were downsizing.  
Out went so much of what we loved: toys, LPs, books I bought used.

Ever recall browsing the shelves and a title strikes you  
because someone you loved used that phrase, you could just hear it?  
You hope the cover lives up to your expectation. Inside, you hope

to find words you can't live without. You want to tell everyone  
you love, love, love this book and when the film comes  
out you want to love it, too. You go back to those pages so often

you feel comfort in the familiar typeface. You hold on to it after  
all your moves, the yellowing pages, the ones that fall out completely.  
Then the person you loved dies a thousand miles away and goes into a box.

The smart thing to do is stop. Stop deciding what junk to donate or keep. Stop  
writing out in large letters everything you own. Let your tears burn. Know  
the only stories that matter happen between the chapters, between

the last word you heard and the ones you have not begun to utter.

## Labyrinth

Candi Byrne, Martinsburg WV, w-ecircle15, r-ecircle1

I stand at the opening of a 60-foot labyrinth, beckoned by a divine call to this  
timeless pattern scored into the dark rich Oregon soil. I note the care with which the  
dozens of grapefruit-sized rocks were set into the earth to mark the edges of the path,  
and the hundreds of smaller stones forming the filigree lunations around the outer  
border. Tall trees, resplendent in summer green, ring the clearing, branches laced  
overhead forming an arboreal cathedral ceiling. Salty ocean air swirls around  
me; an evocative incense.

I am alone, a gypsy homebody searching and seeking. A mid-life runaway.  
A cliché to some, a deserter to others, a vagabond envied by still others.

Fingering the silver labyrinth pendant my daughter gave me at the start of  
my year-long sojourn, I remove my sandals and flex my toes in the dirt, literally  
grounding myself. Tears begin to flow as I offer *namaste* to the countless fears,  
hopes, pleas, prayers, and questions that have been released, blessed, and resolved  
in this sacred space.

With a shaky breath I step onto this path 3,000 miles from what I once knew  
as home. Eyes on the makeshift altar in the center circle I begin the labyrinth  
ritual—a walking meditation. Walk, pray, turn, walk, pray, turn...the path changes  
direction again and again, bringing me close to the center before arcing away to  
a point where I begin to question if I have missed a turn.

I keep moving through the doubt, one foot in front of the other, surrendering  
to the ancient geometry and the energy drawing me towards the center. It's  
strangely silent in this grove—womblike; I hear only my breath and heartbeat.  
Walk, pray, turn, walk, pray, turn, until finally...I arrive.

## In Heavy Like

B. Lynn Goodwin, Danville CA  
Lgood67334@comcast.net

I never understood attraction. Then  
eighteen days ago I responded to a craigslist  
ad: "1944 classic roadster with many miles left!  
Motor hums, transmission smooth and all  
gears work. Two-toned—white with a gray  
top." His metaphor allowed me to tell him my  
engine might sputter and needed to be road  
tested.

In his next e-mail he told me he'd been  
married twice. I told him I'd always been  
single.

He sent a picture of himself leaning  
against a sporty Mazda, and asked if I was open  
to "falling in love and getting married."

He wasn't afraid of commitment, but  
HELLO-O-O! We hadn't even met. Was this  
attraction?

I hesitated and finally wrote, "I could be  
open to finding the love of my life." I like his  
clear-cut goal, but why did he ask this so  
quickly?

Two weeks later, I told a friend I was "in  
like," not "in love."

"Heavy like?" she asked.

"Probably."

On the plus side he's easy to talk to. He's  
friendly, open, patient, and generous. I love  
his kind words, gentle nature, and kisses. I  
enjoy his touch and his asking what I want. I  
respect the help and love he gives each member  
of the congregation where he is a pastor. I feel  
safe with him.

When we are apart, I worry. What about  
money management, control issues, and  
unshared secrets? Why saddle myself with a  
man if I love being single? Why consider it at  
all if I am "saddling" myself?

I fear something I cannot name. I don't  
know him well enough to love.



## Family Values

Trilla Pando, Houston TX, [ppando@gmail.com](mailto:ppando@gmail.com)

Put some values on us—

King of the house? Clearly a C-note—“worth a hundred bucks.”

The kids? Royalty, nothing less. Priceless.

Me? Not the queen, no, chief chambermaid. Loose change.

I changed all right.

I changed the sheets, and I changed the towels.

I changed the diapers, and I changed the diapers.

I changed the hose in the garden and, when the seasons changed,  
I changed the clocks.

I changed my clothes before the king came home from work.

“Mustn’t look like a drudge,” Mom told me  
The same day she told me to change my attitude.

I didn’t say a word, just stored away moments  
The way I stuck spare change in a sock at the back of a drawer.  
Sometimes forgot about them; sometimes took them out for  
counting.

The king changed kingdoms—new wars to launch.  
The princes changed voices, and the princess changed  
hairstyles—about daily.

The chambermaid—finally, changed her attitude.  
Changed her mind.

There was a change in the weather.

She changed her heart; and then she changed her life.

Surprising? Maybe not.  
A hundred bucks in loose change  
Carries quite a bang  
When that sock slings itself upside my head.

Don’t call me a drudge, and don’t call me a queen:  
Call me a C-note.

## My Spine Transplant

Cathy Scibelli, East Norwich NY, [cmscibelli@optonline.net](mailto:cmscibelli@optonline.net)

By the time I was a young child I realized I didn't have a normal backbone. My spine seemed to bend as easily as rubber to every request made to me. Help with the dishes when it wasn't my turn? Sure. Stay after school and clean the board? Yes, Ma'am.

As I grew older, my rubber spine began to corrode as each new request battered it. I gave up going away to college to keep my mother company after my father died. I gave up a writing career to become a housewife.

But then one sacrifice nearly cost my life. I noticed a painful lump in my breast one November, but it was the holiday season and I had too many obligations to worry about my health. I waited until January to get it examined and was sent for a biopsy immediately. The surgeon coldly informed me, "This is cancer. You have a mass under your arm, too." He shook his head disgustedly. "You should have had this checked sooner."

## Put Your Hands Together

Abby November, Austin TX

In July 1993, an Austin newspaper ad read: “Do people think you are funny? Ever want to be a stand-up comic? First class free.” I tried it and have never had second thoughts about the choice.

The workshop and classes opened a new world of creativity and thinking. Comedy writing gave me the opportunity to have fun and make people smile, if not laugh. My day job at the Health Department was stressful, dealing with nit-picking, trivial meeting-filled days and small-minded, bean-counter middle managers.

I looked forward to my comedy classes all week. Colleagues got used to my note pad and pen capturing funny incidents or observations. I bounced materials and premises off my colleagues for their input. The staff was supportive, although they counseled me not to quit my day job.

At the completion of ten weeks, our class performed our “sets” at the local comedy club. My knees were knocking, and I could swear that everyone near me heard my heart beating and saw me sweat. I remembered to breathe and exhale: that was important to prevent my turning blue and passing out.

Out of fifteen comics, I was number 8, a sweet spot: long enough for the crowd to be well lubricated and relaxed, and not so late they were paying their checks and not paying attention to me.

I heard my name announced and the emcee saying, “Put your hands together for Abby November.” I forced a smile and walked up to the emcee, shook his hand, took the microphone and said to the 200 people, “Hello, how are you doing?”

I started on my material, remembering to breathe slowly, looked at the audience a la Jack Benny, and waited for applause. The first applause blew my mind. It was like someone gave me adrenaline! I was hooked. They loved me. Applause is like water for a parched throat or food for the fasting body. I couldn’t get enough then or now, almost twenty years later.

At that moment, the last of my rubber spine disintegrated and something entirely new sprang up. Fueled by indignation and regret, a steel beam began to form. I walked out of that doctor's office and vowed that I was not going to spend whatever time I had left as a marshmallow. I started by finding a new surgeon who was very compassionate.

To my amazement, my steel spine grew stronger as I went through chemotherapy, surgery and radiation. For the first time, I discovered I was capable of saying the word, "No." I began to balance the needs of family and friends against my own. And I'm happy to report that I'm still here two-and-a-half years later making good use of these new talents.

Whenever someone expresses surprise that I turned down a request or an invitation I tell them, "Well, I decided instead of having a new breast constructed, I would get a spine inserted instead." Then I slip away while they're thinking about that.

## Ch-Ch-Changes

Kali' Rourke, Austin TX  
email: kalirourke12@gmail.com,  
www.kalipr.wordpress.com, w-ecircle 3

It is typical for me to relate everything to lyrics. At the age of twelve I announced to my mother that I wanted to compete in a talent show up in Vancouver, B.C. which I had heard about on the radio.

I must give her credit. She didn't laugh hysterically or start off with all the reasons why this was a ludicrous idea. She just looked at me intently, asking, "Can you sing?"

Even I smile at the tiny little voice I had. It was clear, but it was not strong and had the breathy, girlish tone you would expect. My mother didn't pause, and promptly went out and bought me a guitar.

My second obstacle arose as I quickly discovered that no amount of lessons was going to get me up to snuff in time for the contest. Again, my mother practiced faith (or perhaps a blind optimism brought on by her own tone deafness) and she hired her best friend's nephew to be my guitarist.

Meanwhile, I sang and sang. And sang. I practiced holding a microphone and vocalized with old country and western records until I am sure my family's ears were bleeding slightly.

One evening, as we ate our spaghetti dinner, something deep inside my mind clicked into place and I announced, "I think I got it!"

"Got what?" my stepfather asked skeptically.

I opened my mouth to sing and this huge, contralto chest voice poured out, producing a Dolly Parton tune with the ease and phrasing of a professional. I gave it all I had, injecting the plaintive ballad with emotion and bringing tears to everyone's eyes. As I ended the last refrain, there was total silence and then my stepfather started to clap. My mother lit up with pride like I had never seen before and even my younger half sister was stunned into momentary quiet.

My life was about to change in so many ways, and I would be riding a tiger which would alternately reward and disappoint me for the rest of my days.

## Think Fast

Carol Kunnerup, Mott ND  
kunnerup@hotmail.com,  
<https://carolsquilting.wordpress.com>,  
r-ecircle 1, w-ecircle 1

The language instructor is talking, but I am not in this classroom. I have sat on this chair, or a similar one, for the past two years, learning the Danish language. My goal has been to integrate into Danish culture, to learn the language well enough to get a job or continue my education in our new country.

We have just returned from visiting family and friends in Montana and California. Stories of our lives in Denmark were exchanged for news and tales of the happenings in our home town. I bought suitcases, thrift store finds, to empty my remaining art supplies from the storage shed to take back to our Danish home.

Suddenly, it hits me. I know this. I see, now, where this happened. I understand. The day we drove from Sidney, Montana to the airport in Billings (for a flight to visit my mom in California) was as glorious a summer day as could be wished for. Not a cloud in that big blue Montana sky. The air was warm. There was a gentle breeze.

Peter turned to me and said, as we rolled along on the four-lane through mountains covered in lodge pole pines, "There's just something about Montana." I agreed. I was a bit homesick for this gorgeous land that I had invested 22 years of my life in, where each of my children were born, where one still lives and one rests. There is something about Montana.

I am sitting here in class but I am really on the couch sitting next to Peter in our little Danish villa last night. He turned to me and said, "I need to go back." I looked at him, "What?"

He said, "I miss it. I need to go back. I need to farm in the states."

Think fast. Of course we would return. I will use my newly minted B.S degree to get us back. Peter and Trevor would follow after Christmas tree harvest. We would not pick up where we left off. There would be new places, new jobs, and new schools.

---

## Not The End

Danisha Cannon, Lockhart TX

I was twenty years old when I got arrested for the second time. The first time had been a slap on the wrist with probation. But that wasn't serious enough for me. My second arrest led to a three-year prison term, and it was my wake-up call. Before that, I didn't worry about consequences. I chased after fast money and had no time for family or for prayer.

The last two years have been a long and very intense experience. I have learned a lot about myself. I want to be

successful in life and really accomplish things. Since I came to prison, I have earned my GED and participated in educational programs that are aimed at my future. I've set a goal to become a social worker and maybe even a motivational speaker. I want to have a close relationship with my family. I pray three times a day.

Prison has not been the end for me, but the beginning. I won't be here forever and am actually grateful for this journey. Without it, I may never have changed.

## From West to Southwest

Arlene Howard, Rancho Mirage CA, w-ecircle 14

Enjoying the sunset on Maui's western shore, we remarked how amazing that we were celebrating our forty-eighth anniversary. "What are you thinking?" I asked.

"That we have had forty-eight years together, longer than either of our parents."

The dinner was special—made more so because the dinner and hotel were gifts from our daughter and son-in law. On the beach, a couple said their vows. Satiated, we walked back to the hotel on a path beside the Pacific Ocean.

"I have a sharp pain across my chest."

"I'll call Allyson."

"Dad, can you walk?" our doctor daughter asked.

"I'll get help," I said sprinting toward the hotel. The golf-cart driver took me down to where Alan was. No Alan. No answer on his cell phone. We ran to our room. No Alan. The golf cart driver took me to the front desk and whisked himself to where Alan was supposed to be. Alan was found and taken to the ambulance. We started for Maui's hospital, but made a quick turnaround to find my cell phone only to discover I was sitting on it. The ambulance technician did several EKGs, alerted the hospital and told Allyson the results.

"Mom, we're coming."

At the hospital, a blood test confirmed that Alan had suffered a heart attack. "We need to medevac him to Queens Hospital in Honolulu." A taxi whisked me back to the hotel to pack. At 12:30 am, Alan was flown to Honolulu. An all-night Denny's was my home for the next four hours.

"Mom, we have a flight, a hotel and a flight for you. We will be there at noon." By 9:00 am, I was in the hospital. By 9:30 am Alan was back in his room with a stent in a branch of the left anterior descending artery. Pictures of what his heart looked like before and after the stent was inserted showed the blockage had been repaired. My husband and Allyson's Dad is okay.

Four days have passed. We are all relaxing in a hotel with a view Oahu's southwest shore. More changes in direction lie ahead.



## An Evergreen Homecoming

Mitzi Boyd, Fort Worth TX, w-ecircle 15

"This summer is a real scorcher"— words I've heard most of my life here in north Texas. Somehow we must find relief from the heat. During my youth I never dreamed of exotic escapes. Extensive travel and the excessive heat here in Texas finally convinced me in 1975 to move to the amazingly beautiful Orcas Island, Washington—in the far northwest corner of the United States.

As a major lover of all trees, Washington State, being "The Evergreen State," always draws me in. My favorites are the magnificent evergreen Douglas Firs. The more modest madrona trees, with their rich orange-red peeling bark, which exposes a smooth lime green trunk, are also amazing. I'm mesmerized by Orcas Island's pastoral vistas where deer graze and a peek through the tall trees frame shimmering, sparkling coves of deep cold salt water. I especially love watching for a pod of Orca (black and white "killer") whales traveling in search of their next meal or occasionally spotting an eagle perched above. On a clear day one can look back east across the glassy Salish Sea to see the stunning snowcapped Mount Baker.

My subsequent moves from Orcas to Connecticut and on to California followed. Then eighteen years ago I returned, alone, to my hometown in Texas.

This scorching, rainless summer of 2011 is again telling my body to head north to Orcas Island. I'll fly to Seattle then take a bus to the ferry landing where I'll board as a walk-on passenger for the relaxing two hour ride with families chatting and children playing (as my sons did so long ago). I'll again be in heaven as we cross the stunningly beautiful waters separating rocky tree-lined coastlines through the San Juan Islands. I'll breathe in the crisp salt air. The ferry's reverse thrusters and the Captain's public announcement that "all Orcas foot passengers prepare to disembark" will signal our arrival. One of my sons will be vacationing there with his beautiful ten year old—my granddaughter. My heart will fill with gratitude when they walk down to meet my arriving ferry!

## Quem Vidistis Pastores

Denise Jacobs, Baton Rouge LA,  
<http://web.me.com/denisejacobs/Site/Welcome.html>

*Quem Vidistis Pastores*, a dual choir piece, presented a special set of challenges to this UU choir member more attuned to music written and performed by Sweet Honey in the Rock, Bobby McFerrin, and Pat Humphries. In addition to the obvious pronunciation challenges, the piece required the choir to split into two choruses: the Primus and Secundus. This meant that we not only had to blend within our assigned chorus and designated parts, we also had to blend within and between choruses in a fluid movement, or dance, neither partner more prominent or important than the other. I disliked *Quem Vidistis Pastores* so much at first acquaintance that I considered taking a leave from choir. Surely Ila, choir director, had over-reached on this one. Instead of taking a leave, I skipped more than a couple of rehearsals to avoid the song.

*Quem Vidistis Pastores* is all about balance, blend, and cooperation, the perfect metaphor for a choir although I didn't see it that way at the time. The Primus chorus carries the first five measures. At measure six, the Secundus tenors add their voice. At measure eight, Secundus altos join in. By measure nine, all eight voices in two choruses are singing, with and to each other, reinforcing and echoing passionate sentiments—*annunciate nobis. Alleluia.*

In the end, by the time I had reconciled myself to this song, dug in and rehearsed—long before I learned to appreciate the music—everything hinged on the choir's ability to watch and listen. When we do, when we quiet ourselves as a choir and watch and listen like we did at our last rehearsal, in desperation, frankly, and with a sense of urgency, we become a sacrament of sorts, precariously perched, perhaps, but, most certainly a visible outward sign of an inward grace.

Ila recorded our Sunday morning performance, so I know that we sounded like a chorus of angels. Angels. I'm not kidding. And for days afterward I kept singing *et chorus angeleos*, turning the phrase over and over again like a jazz riff.

### On the Edge

Khadijah Lacina, ash-Shihr  
 ummu.mujaahid@gmail.com,  
 www.yemenijourney.com  
 Internet Chapter  
 w-circles 3, 12, 14, and 4

We stand on the edge  
 that slippery, uncertain sand  
 shifting  
 toes dug in  
 wind-driven waves advance  
 swirl twist themselves  
 around our ankles  
 a giant green-eyed cat  
 a last sniff  
 tickle of whiskers  
 they recede  
 lay in wait  
 knowing time  
 is on their side  
 the sun  
 the moon  
 force of nature  
 pulls us from  
 our new land  
 nine years home  
 ancient earth  
 dry air  
 shy smile of a woman  
 in black  
 waves of longing  
 waves of memory  
 waves of home  
 we only await the time  
 to dive in

We don't often change directions or, rather, we don't often get the option to change them. And even when we do, we tend to stay the course, walk the line, stick with the tried and true. Most of the time the really big directional changes are forced upon us by seen and unseen forces: a tornado flattens your home, a test turns positive, a significant other chooses not to be. You're then left with a choice. What do you do? Do you choose options presented to you or do you find your own?

"Do you want to land to Blythe or do you want to go to Palm Springs?"

"Let's make a turn and go, uh, how far away is Yuma from right now?"

"Yuma is at your 3:00 position and 50 miles."

"We'll take Yuma."

I'm no airline pilot, but I'd like to think that I would choose Yuma too. In fact, I think, I already have. Fortunately, my change of direction wasn't the result of a gaping hole in the fuselage of a plane flying at 34,000 feet, although at the time, I did feel a little short of breath and in a bit of a tailspin.

"This is so hard but your position is going to be eliminated. No, not the program...It's nothing personal...Your program duties will be added to someone else's in another department. Sorry." The regret expressed not quite matching its delivery.

A couple of options are suggested and rejected. Soon after, the co-pilot in my head offers another direction. It is definitely a sharp turn and a bit of a risk, but my instinct tells me to go with it. And it works.

Yuma is a tough city on the edge of the Colorado River. Not exactly what we expected the day my husband, daughter and I detoured three hours from Phoenix seven years ago to find Roxaboxen, a park inspired from a true story in my daughter's literature book. The park, like Yuma, seemed a little unloved, but we valued the experience, tucking it away fondly in our memories.

Sometimes, you need to take Yuma.

## Home Again

Janice Strohmeier, Houston TX,  
jimmy768816@sbcglobal.net, w-ecircle 3

I lowered my head when the chancellor called my name; the presenter draped the Master's hood around my shoulders, and over my honors sash. I looked up. My memory records the auditorium, the audience, the seven-piece string-and-horn orchestra as shimmering.

Every grueling minute of this Master's degree flashed before me while I absorbed the moment. Four years...the books...the papers...long nights disappearing into mornings...and when my well ran empty and I was certain I did not have one word left in me to write my final thesis, my advisor told me to "dig deeper."

I dug.

How did I accomplish this? How was this triumph mine? I have vague memory of my husband, my cherished, silent supporter, darting around in the background of our life, doing laundry, fixing awkward suppers, taking the puppy for piddle breaks, calling me from the grocery store, lost somewhere between the hurried lists I scratched out for him and aisle seven.

I achieved this because he did it with me.

Several months after the glow of my accomplishment softened, we decided to rearrange our rooms. The "office"—my lone fortress would now become the guest room. I emptied the old wooden desk, cleared out my bookshelves, hauled away boxes of scratch paper and first-drafts. Out came the desk, away went the chair, down came the motivational pictures and quotes pasted on the wall above the computer. Everything that was me for four years, simply gone. The room was empty. We looked around imagining where the guest bed would go when my eyes caught a spot on the floor.

Under the desk, tired and worn carpet fibers stared back at me; flattened by hours of crossed ankles, soles of my feet planted firmly on the floor while my head whirled in books and words, theories and research. Battered reminder of solitary student, accomplished academic, lonesome wife.

My husband and I shared silence as we looked at the spot on the floor. Wordless, our hands touched, our fingers entwined. He, lost husband, had recovered his lonesome wife.

## Growing Up

Mary Lee Fulkerson, Reno NV, maryweave@gbis.com

Outside, incessant rain fell like my twelve year-old tears. The previous week I'd faced two hurdles: a new country school and my first period. My naive mother balked at my whispered exhortations from the principal's telephone, but she finally figured it out, and soon I was home, following her mortifying and mystifying instructions. This stuff was going to happen every month?

Next she hauled me to town for my first bra. In that dressing room, fighting hooks, straps, and a determined saleslady, I despaired.

I wanted to be a boy. But lately the boys didn't cheer when I made a running catch. Instead, they watched simpering girls dab stupid red stuff on their lips. Worse, I was the tallest girl in the entire school and had the biggest feet.

The final blow came when a teenage neighbor telephoned, asking me to perform the Charleston with him at the farmer's Grange Hall. I naturally declined, but my brainless mother again intervened.

I frowned at the raindrops and felt their misery. The baby napped and toddler Stephen played, while brother was to mop the floor.

"Water's too hot," he called. "I'll let it cool."

Suddenly, tortured screams slammed the air. Stephen tumbled into the scalding water. Mom yanked his steaming body from the bucket and I saw little white pieces of skin falling, then hid behind a door, crying and praying. The shock stabbed my body like a thousand fiery knives. Dad sped Stephen to Franklin Hospital in San Francisco, where he received skin grafts, his withered little body fighting for life.

Stephen survived. And as I helped him learn to walk again, I realized this wonderful miracle of life was what really mattered.

I turned thirteen, then fourteen; the uneven terrain of my life smoothed out and I was no longer tripped up by it. I learned to Charleston and discovered the fun of both dancing and boys. I sneaked lipstick from Mom, but she probably knew.

In fact, my mother became a lot wiser in the next few years. Funny how that happens.

## Special Notice:

### Membership Dues to Remain at Current Levels

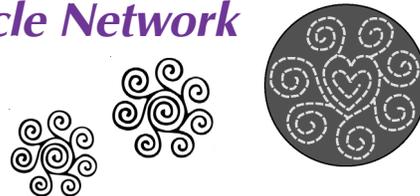
In their third quarter meeting in July the Board of Directors voted to temporarily forego the planned incremental increase in member dues because of the struggling economy and concern about the impact such an increase would have on our members. For the present, regular member dues will remain at the current levels of \$45 in the US (Canada & Mexico: \$55, elsewhere: \$60).

*Lisa Shirah-Hiers, President SCN*



## Circles: The Heart of Story Circle Network Circling Together

by Barbara Lindquist Miller



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

The core experience of Story Circle Network happens in writing and reading circles. It is in these small groups that we share our stories, are encouraged to write about our life journey, and improve our writing skills. The companionship of the circle provides us with the ongoing discovery of new depths within ourselves. The pursuit of life-story writing often lifts up connections to family, both positive and negative, which inform our future self-understanding and relationships.

Story Circle has three types of circles:

**There are 46 face-to-face writing circles.** They are in California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Texas, Washington, Wisconsin and the country of Yemen. (Some may not be currently active, but there may be others we don't know about.)

**There is a face-to-face reading circle** in Austin, Texas, which began in 1997 and has met without interruption ever since. Two new Story Circle members have indicated interest in starting a reading circle in their own location.

The **SCN Internet Chapter** has fifteen writing circles and a reading circle. These can be accessed by becoming a member of the Internet Chapter.

Information about all of these opportunities can be found on the SCN webpage under "Who We Are" and then clicking on "Story Circles Around the World." Check out the options yourself if you are not yet engaged in a circle. Many new members are seeking this opportunity. Will you start a circle in your area?

The process for our many groups is very diverse. Pat Flathouse, a long-time member of SCN shares her engagement with other women in three circles. She facilitates three circles in Austin, Texas. Here's what Pat tells us about these projects.

The first is Pat's continuing OWL (Older Women's Legacy) Group. "This group of women began writing by going through the OWL writing program," Pat says, "and when the five weeks were over, they wanted to continue writing, so we created the Continuing OWL Writing Circle. The group averages about 10 to 12 women each month and they have been meeting for about six to eight years at St. John Neumann Catholic Church. They meet the first Tuesday of each month from 1 to 2:30 p.m. year around. The group was formerly led by Jane Ross, but Jane took

a year off and now the members of the group take turns providing the writing prompt each month. My role is to remind the members of meetings and to make sure someone will lead the group and provide the writing prompt."

Pat's second group is the St. John Neumann Writing Group. This group of women began meeting two years ago and they meet at St. John Neumann Catholic Church the first Monday of each month from 1 to 2:30 during the school year. "My role with this group," Pat says, "is to remind members of meetings and provide the writing prompt for this group."

Pat's third group is the Westminster Writing Group, which began meeting about four years ago. Pat says: We meet at a local retirement center the fourth Tuesday of each month from 5 to 6:30 p.m. year around. My role with this group is to provide the writing prompt, but if I am unable to attend, they meet and another member provides the writing prompt. One of the group members contacts everyone each month to remind them about the meeting."

No circle in your geographical area? YOU can start one with the help of the SCN Facilitator's Guide which is free to SCN members. Join the writing stream of Story Circle and give other women the gift of life-story writing. Many members are ready to assist new facilitators.

If you have questions e-mail me at [circles@storycircle.org](mailto:circles@storycircle.org).

### Great Gifts for Yourself...or the Writers in Your Life

Visit our online store! Choose from a number of products with the Story Circle Network logo, and some with quotations by, for, and about women.

Your purchases help support the Story Circle Network.

We plan to add new products, so stop by often.



[www.cafepress.com/storycircle](http://www.cafepress.com/storycircle)



# Gail Straub: On Empowerment, Agency and Feminine Wisdom

by Lisa Shirah-Hiers

2012 Keynote Speaker



Gail Straub will be the keynote speaker at *Stories From the Heart VI*, SCN's national women's memoir conference. Her memoir *Returning to My Mother's House: Taking Back the Wisdom of the Feminine* is the 2009 Nautilus Silver Award Winner in the memoir category, the 2008 Winner in the National Best Books Women's Issues Category and finalist in ForeWord Magazine's 2008 Book of the Year in the Category of Family and Relationships.

Gail is the author of *The Rhythm of Compassion: Caring for Self, Connecting with Society* as well as *Circle of Compassion*, a book of meditations. She is also the co-author of *Empowerment: The Art of Creating Your Life As You Want It*. She and her husband and co-author, David Gershon, direct the Empowerment Institute, a school for transformative leadership. Certified graduates of the Institute implement their empowerment model in education, business, health, the arts and social change institutions. Now, through their Imagine Program, Gail and David are offering their empowerment model to women in Afghanistan, Darfur, Nigeria, India and South Africa, to help them build strong, empowered lives.

**SCJ:** You've said you wrote *Returning to My Mother's House: Taking Back the Wisdom of the Feminine* to honor your mother. Can you talk more about that?

**GS:** I wrote the book to get to know my mother. She had died 36 years before, when she was 55 and I was only 23. There was a long period when I just denied that loss and really hadn't grieved her. When I was approaching the age of 55 I really started thinking about her, poring back over her life; it was a very healing journey. Not only did I grieve her, but perhaps equally important, I got to know her. It became apparent to me that her story, her loss of this instinctual, intuitive wisdom, was universal. Not only had she lost it but I was beginning to lose it and women all around me all over the world were experiencing that same loss.

**SCJ:** In the book you talk about your mother's transition from a free spirited artist to an exhausted working mom, struggling to compete with Wilmington high society. That seemingly led to a figural and literal breaking of her heart and ultimately to her death from a rare heart condition. Why do you think you're mother switched from the inner directed life to the outer?

**GS:** I think that it's many, many things, and that they're complex. Some of them were my mother's own personal demons, her own personal psychology, and some of it was the dominant patriarchal society that conspired to steal all of that away from her. It was a combination of both. For most of us, whether we lived in my mother's generation or my generation or your daughter's, it will be a complex confluence of influences that

challenges us to stand up for the feminine and protect the feminine. At some point I say that perhaps my mother was just doing the best she could. Many readers say to me that they come to a point in their healing journey where they can say that—not just about their mothers but also about themselves.

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

**GS:** I've gotten a lot of email from women who've read it. What they always say is they understand their mothers more after reading the book. I think that was my greatest hope—that women would become more deeply aware of this primordial, archetypal bond and that the love and connection between mother and

daughter could move to another level.

**SCJ:** There's been so much wounding between mothers and daughters. Do you think this is harder in our culture because of the way we devalue the feminine or is it just a universal experience?

**GS:** I think it's inescapable. I mean it goes back to Greek mythology. Right? One of the rich and mysterious themes of the human condition is the mother-daughter bond and the way all the wide spectrum of human emotion is called forth in it, from deep love to hate, from understanding to complete lack of understanding. It's as if this bond in all its complexity is a way we can grow and live the full human experience. It's not easy. I never met a mother and daughter who could say to me "this was an easy journey for us."

"I think now that taking back my feminine was like a holy excavation, a layer-by-layer digging to reclaim the hidden artifacts of untamed imagination, kinship with the mystery, quiet contemplation, feelings and moods, and the fluid spaciousness that embraces paradox, mending the opposites of life into a whole." ~From page 100

**SCJ:** What did you learn yourself from doing the book?

**GS:** I learned—so many writers have said this before me—that when someone dies physically, yes, there’s this enormous loss; you don’t have their physical presence, but they’re still remarkably available to you emotionally and spiritually. Writing is such a profound way to keep that link alive. I wouldn’t have known before writing the book that I would get to know my mother through writing about her. I also learned how a personal story is so often also a universal story. I started out thinking it was going to be a story about my mom and me perhaps, but then it became equally a story about the universal loss of the feminine.

**SCJ:** I’ve seen this over and over in SCN, that no matter how diverse the religious or cultural backgrounds, when women tell their stories, other women can connect with it.

**GS:** Absolutely, It’s the power of story, that it is simultaneously unique and universal, perhaps in equal measures.

**SCJ:** It’s also very validating for the woman telling her story to realize she’s not alone in her experience.

**GS:** I think that’s an intrinsic part of the healing of stories. In my own classes in story telling and writing we work with the trilogy or trinity of writing the story, then giving voice to the story (literally reading the story out loud), and third, having it heard and witnessed. We connect emotionally much more when we actually give voice to the story. You know, I had a funny experience with that. After I wrote the book I did all these readings in book stores and for different groups. I found I often connected more deeply emotionally when I was reading the passage aloud—even more deeply than when I wrote it. That three-way synergy is very strong.

**SCJ:** What was the biggest challenge for you in writing the book?

**GS:** It was the same challenge that all writers face. I had to find the voice. That took some time because it was about my mother, but it was also about me, but then ultimately it also was about the universal loss of the feminine. And of course, there was the other great challenge that all writers face—I had to keep peeling deeper and deeper layers to find deeper truth. Because the response that a reader has, as we know, is to deep truth. I went through any number of drafts to get to that deeper truth. And then I was mighty nervous when it was published because I said to myself, “Oh my god. All my dirty laundry is now hanging out for the whole world to see.” But it was okay, because so many people can connect with the deep truth that you’re telling. Still, that was scary in the beginning.

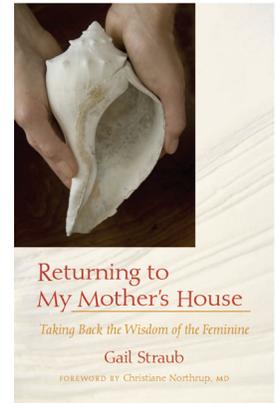
**SCJ:** Why is it so important for us to connect with our voice, to put our own truth out there?

**GS:** I think there’s a tremendous loss of imagination in current culture—not just in the West but in other parts of the world as well. Any artist—a painter, a musician, a writer, a film maker—in some way is helping people to reconnect with their deepest imagination. And the imagination is where vision and healing and creativity live. The challenges we face in society today are so immense, so challenging, that we need that untamed, unbridled imagination to help us think outside of the box, to give us new solutions and ideas for how to live. At its best, any art form can do that.

**SCJ:** Is this lack of imagination the cause of the apathy we see in society today?

**GS:** I think that so much of the spiritual malaise, the spiritual emptiness of the times we live in is because of social apathy. So much has been written about the fact that narcissism leads to emptiness, while active engagement with the challenges of the world actually leads to more meaning and more fulfillment. I wrote another book (*The Rhythm of Compassion*) where I talk about how to balance self care with caring for the world. When those two things are in balance we seem to be most fulfilled. There’s a sense of meaning and connection. Engagement is the greatest antidote to apathy—and really to emptiness as well.

(Continued on page 22)



“This is the story of how I returned to my mother’s house and reclaimed my own female wisdom, taking back what both Mom and I had betrayed. I see now how my story is so many of our stories. It is the story of both men and women who have abandoned their inner lives, leaving behind their hearts where deep dark feelings reside; putting aside their intuitive imagination where dreams flourish; ignoring the worlds where the irrational and the mysterious offer their incomparable gifts; and disowning the realms of silence, simplicity, and solitude where the interior matures. Modern life rarely acknowledges or even allows space for such things. But we ignore these things at our peril, both as individual human beings and as an earth family.”

~Page xiv

“As her artist’s intuition and imagination were slowly buried under family pressures and a growing need to keep up with society’s standards, her inner life was swallowed whole by the dragon of outer demands. Back then I didn’t know how precisely my mother’s loss and broken heart mirrored the universal betrayal of the feminine in our society, nor could I begin to guess how much of my own life would be dedicated to making up for this loss, to battling with that very same ferocious dragon.”

~Pages 39-40

“I am still learning to navigate the difference between the seductive emptiness that I compulsively need to fill, and the open emptiness that leaves me free to simply participate fully in my own life.”

~Page 132

**SCJ:** What do you say to people who scoff at the idea of a separate feminine experience?

**GS:** My whole point is that both men and women need the masculine and the feminine. The feminine archetype emphasizes emotion, intuition, the invisible and the intangible and a respect for the interior life. Obviously, men need that as much as women. The masculine archetype emphasizes intellect, rational process, what's visible and tangible and a respect for the exterior life, and clearly, women need those as much as men. So my simple answer is we all need both in balance to be healthy, creative people. The problem in western culture—because this is not true in some of the parts of the world where I work—is that the masculine values and attributes are more dominant. It's so poignant. Many men who've read the book have said to me "I need this. I need to open my heart and balance my heart with my head. I need to nourish and respect my interior life. I'm burned out, I'm all outer." So I think the journey to understand and respect and protect the feminine archetype is something that serves both men and women.

**SCJ:** Let's talk about the Imagine program.

**GS:** My husband and I started this empowerment work thirty years ago. Over those years we've developed a very elegant and precise methodology which allows behavior change to take place. A year ago our very dear colleague, Dr. Anita Shankar, encouraged us to take this strategy for behavior change to the poorest, most disenfranchised people in the world. She explained that in most development programs women are given money and education and very strong and effective outer strategies, i.e. the masculine. But they're not taught how to take their fate back in their own hands, to develop the interior courage, strength and resiliency they need to go back to school, get a job, teach their children and all those outer things. In development language this is called agency: the capacity to effect interior behavior change. Our Imagine program is a strategy to deliver agency and behavior change to some of the poorest and most disenfranchised women in the world and so in a very interesting way our conversation has come full circle. Because agency is about the interior. We've spoken throughout our entire interview about the need for men and women to balance the outer and the inner, so here we are coming back to that with these women. They also need a balance of agency—the capacity to work with their interior beliefs—as well as the outer skills of aids prevention, health, microfinance and so forth. But I'm very passionate about it because the women there are just extraordinary. They've lived through genocide, gang rape and marriage at very young ages to men 20 and 30 years older—just extraordinarily difficult life circumstances and yet their resilience is intact. I wake up every morning and their faces are in front of me and they inspire me to do my best and to offer my best. So they've become the fire in my soul.

To find out more about Gail's memoir visit:  
[www.returningtomymothershouse.com](http://www.returningtomymothershouse.com)

For more about the Imagine Program go to:  
[www.imagineprogram.net](http://www.imagineprogram.net)

## Members In Print & The News

SCN members make the news by publishing books, articles, essays, poems, dramas, and art. Below are some of our members' achievements during the last few months.



If you're an SCN member who has made the news, please let us know by sending and email to [news@storycircle.org](mailto:news@storycircle.org).

### June

**Sherry Wachter's** new book, *Benchmarks, A Single Mother's Illustrated Journal*, will be published next month. The book will be available in three formats: a simple black and white "text" book, an illustrated, full-color "gift" book, and a kindle book.

**Khadijah Lacina's** new book *My Home, My Path* was released this month. The Kindle version will be available soon as well. Khadijah's book, *A Slice of Summer: A Children's Poetry Book of Colors*, will be released in July.

**Dorothy Sells Clover** just published her first book: *Cornucopia*, a book of poetry, which can be ordered online through Tate Publishing.

### July

**Sharon Blumberg's** story, "God's Eyes (This is No Yarn!)", was recently published online at Handprints On My Heart.

**Samantha White** published her first book (at the age of 73) this spring: *Someone to Talk To: Finding Peace, Purpose, and Joy After Tragedy and Loss*.

**Edith O'Nuallain** was quoted in a recently-published book, *Lectio Divina: the Sacred Art* by Christine Valters Paintner (pgs. 93-94). She also has a short piece published in the April-May 2011 issue of "BookWomen."

**Sallie Moffitt's** personal essay, "Water Wheels", is available in the literary journal *Ten Spurs, Volume 5*, published by the Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism, University of North Texas.

### August

**Kate Farrell's** memoir anthology about mother, *Wisdom Has a Voice: Every Daughter's Memories of Mother*, is now available on Amazon for Kindle or as a Kindle app. The print book edition will launch on September 1, 2011.

**Judy M. Miller** has written and micro-published an e-guide for adoptive parents: *What To Expect From Your Adopted Tween*. And, her essay, "Emergence" has been published in Sensational Journeys: 48 Personal Stories of Sensory Processing Disorder.

Get all the details at:  
[www.storycircle.org/MembersInPrint.php](http://www.storycircle.org/MembersInPrint.php)

## There's Still Time to Contribute to Our Annual True Words Anthology



Hello to all SCN Women who write the True Words of your lives,

We're still accepting submissions for a brief time longer for our next annual True Words Anthology, which will be published in late fall of this year. The Anthology is a unique publishing opportunity in two ways for SCN members: first, your stories and poems can be longer than the SCN Journal True Words limit of 350 words (up to 1,000 words in the Anthology) and, secondly, there is no thematic prompt. Thus you can send in a life story on any topic you wish. There is a submission limit of three stories or poems per member.

Here's the 2011 Anthology Schedule:

July 1, 2011 – the call for submissions open  
 September 7, 2011 – the call for submissions closes  
 Mid-November, 2011 – you'll receive your Anthology

We seek stories and poems that tell the truths of your life. In this—our large international circle of women who share our life stories, these truths connect on so many levels with other women in ways that sometimes are unimaginable.

So, lift up your pen, write down the words that come into your heart, polish up those little jewels, paste them into the online submission form link included in the Call for Submissions ([www.storycircle.org/journal/anthology\\_submission\\_form.php](http://www.storycircle.org/journal/anthology_submission_form.php)), and hit the Send button. We both welcome and look forward to sharing your words.

*Visit the Story Circle Network Blog*

**Telling Herstories: *The Broad View*  
 And Now...*One Woman's Day***

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



Warmest regards,  
 Mary Jo

Mary Jo Doig  
 True Words editor, Story Circle Journal  
 True Words Anthology editor, 2011

 <p><input type="checkbox"/> This membership is a gift.</p> <p>My name and address:</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <p>My phone and e-mail:</p> <hr/> <hr/>	<h3 style="text-align: center;">Join the Story Circle Network!</h3> <p>Annual Membership:</p> <p>_____ USA: \$45</p> <p>_____ Canada &amp; Mexico: \$55 (International MO)</p> <p>_____ International \$60 (International MO)</p> <p>_____ Internet Chapter: \$20/yr (in addition to your national dues)</p> <p>_____ Sample copy of the <i>Story Circle Journal</i>: \$5</p> <p>Name _____</p> <p>Address _____</p> <p>City _____ State _____ Zip _____ - _____</p> <p>Phone _____</p> <p>Email _____ Amount enclosed _____</p> <p>Become a supporting member and help Story Circle Network grow. Check here:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> \$75 Friend    <input type="checkbox"/> \$125 Supporter    <input type="checkbox"/> \$225 Sustainer    <input type="checkbox"/> \$400+ Benefactor</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> \$100 Donor    <input type="checkbox"/> \$175 Contributor    <input type="checkbox"/> \$300 Patron</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Make your check to                  Story Circle Network                  PO Box 500127                  Austin TX 78750-0127</p> <p style="text-align: right;">09/11</p>
--	---	--

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

Nonprofit Org  
U.S. Postage  
Paid  
Austin, TX  
Permit #215

## True Words: Looking Ahead

by Mary Jo Doig

We're always 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 your stories are no more than 350 words and your poems are 30 lines or less. We may edit your submissions for grammar and spelling. Members only, please.

***The December prompt for True Words is: Holiday Stories.***

Holidays bring us many emotions, traditions, and memories. Holidays are splendid, joyful times for some and hard, difficult times for others. As the end of the year holidays begin to move nearer to us, what holiday stories come to mind for you? Do write that story down and send it in. We would love to share your story!

We prefer that you submit your work directly to the website at: <http://www.storycircle.org/members/frmjournalsubmission.shtml>. There you will find questions about biographical info you'd like included with your writing, if published.

You may also send your writing via email or as a Word attachment. 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. Send your entry to Mary Jo Doig at [scn.truewords@gmail.com](mailto:scn.truewords@gmail.com). Be sure to note in the body of your email any biographical information (email address, blog address, writing or reading circle name) you'd like included, if published.

If you submit typed or handwritten stories, please make sure that every word is legible. Mail to: Mary Jo Doig, 2468 Craigs Store Road, Afton, VA 22920.

Not all our authors choose to list their email addresses, when published. If you would like to contact an author who does not include her email address with her published piece, you can contact Peggy Moody ([mmoody1@austin.rr.com](mailto:mmoody1@austin.rr.com)) who will notify the author.

***Future Topics and deadlines for upcoming Journals are:***

March, 2012 (due January 15)—A Quilt

June, 2012 (due April 15)—One Summer Day

September, 2012 (due July 15)—A Harvest Story and Recipe



## Call for Presenters

Our Stories from the Heart conference program will feature 20 presentations organized into four concurrent tracks, with five 90-minute presentations in each track. Presentation tracks are: Finding Our Voices, Nuts & Bolts, Putting Our Hearts on Paper, Storytelling: Ways and Means. To submit a proposal, fill out the form on our website at:

**<http://storycircle.org/Conference/frmpresenter.php>,  
or email your proposal to, [confprogram@storycircle.org](mailto:confprogram@storycircle.org)**

***The deadline for all proposals is September 15, 2011***