



STORY CIRCLE JOURNAL

Vol. 17 No. 1, March 2013

The newsletter for women with stories to tell



Susan J. Tweit

SCN's Super-Star Blogger of 2012, Susan J. Tweit

Every month, we feature one of our SCN bloggers in our national eletter. The selection is made on the basis of the blog's outstanding content, visual appeal, and the importance of its contribution to the growing universe of lifestory blogging. You can see all of our wonderful bloggers and Star Bloggers listed here: <http://www.storycircle.org/blogs.shtml>. In January, SCN members chose Susan J. Tweit as their favorite blogger from the list of talented women. Below is Susan's post, Woman Alone, from her blog Love Every Moment, at <http://susanjtweit.com>.

The Susan Wittig Albert LifeWriting Competition
May-June, 2013
Details on page 3



Stories from the Heart VII
April 11-13, 2014
Wyndham Hotel, Austin, TX
Details on page 3



Woman Alone

by Susan J. Tweit

While I was away in Miami the week before last, I came to a sobering realization: I've been half of a couple essentially all of my adult life, almost two-thirds of my years. (I'm 55 years old. Richard and I were together nearly 29 years, and I was married once before.) There's nothing wrong with that, if couple-dom is healthy and nurturing, and my time with Richard was certainly that. Still, what it means is I have no practice in living alone.

It's not that I'm not independent and capable. This morning when I got up and opened the blinds, clouds masked the eastern horizon—there would be no solar energy to heat the house. So I put on my bathrobe, cleaned the ash pan in the wood stove, took the ashes out to the metal bucket on the back porch, and then chopped kindling and firewood, and made a fire.

Then I checked the temperature in Richard's studio to make sure it was warm enough (there's a woodstove there too), did yoga, cooked my hot cereal, and got on with my day.

Which included finally taking the lights off the solstice tree and hauling it down to the creek bank to re-vegetate an eroding area, hosting our little Quaker/Buddhist silent worship time, replacing an attic vent that chinook wind gusts blew askew, paying bills, filling out yet another after-death form (I swear that paperwork is the only eternal thing about our lives!), adjusting a squeaky door hinge, calling my dad and helping him sort out problems with his computer, and making dinner.

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Story Circle Network's
Benefit Raffle
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Letter From SCN's President— Cobwebs



Did you ever sit down to write and absolutely nothing came to mind? First you begin to fear that nothing will ever come to you. Then the empty page begins to resemble an evil, ugly ogre taunting you. And, before you know it, you begin to wonder if you really are a writer.

This was my experience when I sat down to write this column. I would type a few words and, after reading them, I'd growl and hit delete. I tried to remember all the helpful hints I've heard about ridding oneself of writer's block: Walk away from it for a bit; work on something else; write about something you know; look around your environment for prompts.

I walked away and went to the kitchen to load the dishwasher, a job I dislike so much that I thought facing the blank page would certainly be more enjoyable. It didn't work. I picked up the manuscript I've been working on. Probably not a good idea when one is wondering if she really is a writer. Write about something I know? I know about writing. Well, that was just a catch 22. How can one write about writing when one is not able to write anything?

I had one helpful hint to try. Search your environment for prompts. My environment is my office. At first, the books stacked on the wall-to-wall shelves seemed to be mocking me: "You'll never have your name on one of us." That was absolutely no help at all.

Looking up at the ceiling, looking for that elusive topic that might be floating up there, I began to notice how many cobwebs had appeared while I had been too busy writing in the past few weeks. Ah, something to do, a good excuse to not write. I grabbed the dust mop and started sweeping away those hanging hairy strands.

A strange thing happened as I moved around the room clearing my writing space. Removing the cobwebs from my surroundings seemed to open a creative space in my mind. And so, this column was written.

If you're stuck in a dead writing zone, you might want to think about where your cobwebs are. When you find them, pick up your pen, open your laptop and begin to sweep them away.

~Pat LaPointe



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.

Story Circle Journal

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

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We welcome your letters, queries,
and suggestions.

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Membership Rates

One Year \$45 US
\$55 Canada & Mexico
\$60 Elsewhere
Foreign Memberships: Please pay by
International Postal Money Order.

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.

Save the Date!



Stories from the
Heart VII
April 11-13, 2014
Wyndham Hotel,
Austin, TX

Stories from the Heart VII will provide you the opportunity to meet your Story Circle Network sisters, make new friends, learn new skills and hone old ones. It's a wonderful opportunity to share and to learn and to understand the heart of the Story Circle Network.

Our keynote speaker Linda Hasslestrom, author of *No Place Like Home*, has led a fascinating life; you can read her biography at her website: www.windbreakhouse.com.

Nancy Curtis, founder of High Plains Press, will speak on Sunday. Besides publishing, Nancy has co-edited three collections of writing by plainwomen. Learn more about Nancy and High Plains Press here: www.highplainspress.com.

Stories from the Heart VII (can you believe, VII?) will be co-chaired by Peggy Moody and Jeanne Guy. With Peggy's experience and Jeanne's fresh ideas, you will not want to miss out on this conference!

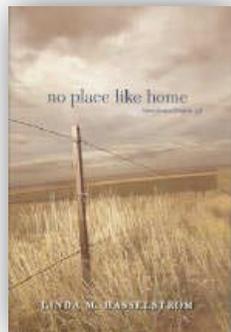
Mary Jo Doig will provide support as the Program Chair. She will send out a Call for Presenters in June or July of 2013.

The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart.

~Helen Keller



Linda Hasslestrom



Nancy Curtis

The Susan Wittig Albert LifeWriting Competition May-June, 2013

SCN is proud to announce its Fourteenth Annual Lifewriting Competition, named in honor of our founder, best-selling mystery writer Susan Wittig Albert.

This year's topic focuses on family. We all have one, be it the one you were born into, the one you created, or a community of people with which you share common interests and have a trusting, comfortable, validating relationship.

Whomever you consider "family" the following words are here to get you thinking, and of course, writing:

"Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family. Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one."

—Jane Howard

"The family—that dear octopus form whose tentacles we never quite escape, nor, in our inmost heart, ever quite wish to."

—Dodie Smith

"I don't visit my parents often because Delta Airlines won't wait in the yard while I run in."

—Margaret Smith

"'Family'...the we of me."

—Carson McCullers

The judges look for entries that are fresh and original, tell a compelling story in a clear and authentic voice, are responsive to the topic, and have been polished and proofread for presentation in the competition. The most successful submissions are rich in evocative detail and avoid generalizations and abstractions. Entries will not be returned; evaluations will not be available. The judging team will be made up of Story Circle Facilitators and published authors.

SCN will award one prize of \$100, one prize of \$75, and two prizes of \$35 each. Winning stories will be published in a special section of the September Story Circle Journal and will be featured on the SCN's award-winning website. Upon the judges' recommendation, other entries may be published in later issues of the Journal and in other SCN print or on-line publications.

storycircle.org/Contests

"We are the only ones who can tell our stories because we are the only ones who have lived them."

—Susan Wittig Albert

Feeling Lucky? Support Story Circle Network & Win a Great Prize!

Tickets on sale now through June 30 at
storycircle.org/raffle

Story Circle Network's Benefit Raffle

Our January - June 2013 raffle features **10 GREAT PRIZES**. The first winner drawn will select her (his) prize from the list, and subsequent winners will select from the remaining prizes until they have all been awarded. Tickets are just \$3 each, limit 20 tickets during the raffle period, and open to members and non-members.



◆ Handturned 8" Hackberry Bowl by Bill Albert. Value \$180



◆ StoryCircle Online Class Enrollment Fee. Value \$320

◆ Story Circle Collection (*Starting Points, Kitchen Table Stories, What Wildness is This?, With Courage & Common Sense*). Value \$73

◆ China Bayles Mystery Cameo Character Appearance. Value \$50

◆ Garden-Theme Wall Quilt by Jinni Turkelson. Value \$100



◆ 31 Gifts Cindy Tote. Donated by Pat LaPointe. Value \$70

◆ Journal Collection I, donated by Patricia Charpentier. (*Five-Year Journal, Eating an Elephant: Write Your Life One Bite at a Time*). Value \$50.

◆ Journal Collection II, donated by Janet Balletto & Carol Smallwood. (*Everyday Journal, Women Writing on Family: Tips on Writing, Teaching, & Publishing*) Value \$50.

◆ Hand-Made Necklace & Earrings by Theresa Rubin. Value \$85



Woman Alone from page 1

Once I would have had Richard's help. I can do many of the things he used to do, but there's a lot I can't do: I'm not Ms. Fix-it (though I'm learning); I can't use power tools (Raynaud's syndrome long ago took the nerves in my fingertips, so I don't trust myself); I couldn't design or build my way out of a paper bag; I'm neither big nor brawny.

But I'm smart, determined, and I have friends and neighbors who are happy to help. (Thanks especially to Maggie and Tony, Jim and Rynn, Kerry and Dave, Bev, Lisa and Tim, Jerry, Susan, Toni, Doris and Bill, Grant, Bob, and Mark and Brenda. You all are wonderful!)

Still, at the end of the day (and the beginning, in the middle of the night, and much of the time in between), I'm alone. On my own with whatever decisions, fears, challenges, and issues that may come up. That's new. Richard and I handled most everything together. Sometimes that made things difficult, but we worked it out; we learned to forgive, and to trust each other.

Even when he was bedridden, and frustrated that he couldn't do the things he had always done, we talked everything over. His brain might have been severely impacted by the glioblastoma that killed him, but his mind never lost its brilliance.

Now he's gone. At first I assumed I would simply continue on the path we walked together. Now I realize that since his death blew a hole in my life, I have an opportunity I didn't anticipate: I'm no longer part of a pair. I'd rather be with Richard, but that's not an option. So I'm going to explore what this new role of "Woman Alone" holds.

That title, by the way, comes from Margaret Coel's Shoshone/Arapaho Reservation mysteries. *Woman Alone* is the name bestowed on one of Coel's main characters, Arapaho lawyer Vicky Holden, for her solo status. It's not necessarily meant as a compliment. But it could be. I like *Woman Alone* better than "widow," a word that comes from an Indo-European root meaning "empty." Just because I'm without a man, and specifically, without the love of my life, does not make me empty. At all.

When Richard was healthy, our path was was a matter of mutual adjustment to reconcile sometimes divergent needs. After his bird visions revealed his brain cancer, our direction was guided by helping him live well for as long as possible.

Now I'm alone, charting my own life-path. On I go, mindful of the grace in this ephemeral gift of life...

◆ Garden Collection. Donated by Susan J. Tweit & Susan Albert. (*The Rocky Mountain Garden Survival Guide, China Bayles' Book of Days*) Value \$50.



storycircle.org/raffle



Internet Chapter

by Lee Ambrose

“Stories not only give us a much needed practice on figuring out what makes people tick, they give us insight into how we tick.” ~Lisa Cron, *Wired for Story: The Writer’s Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence*

Have you ever found yourself wondering what makes people tick? I’d venture to say that most of us, at some point in time, have done just that.

We’ve watched an individual’s behavior. Or, we’ve listened to a conversation between two people. And, sometimes our observations have left us shaking our heads, wondering what precipitated the behaviors or words we’ve just witnessed. Other times we find our hearts warmed by what we’ve just seen or heard.

People watching is one of my favorite pastimes. Many times I’ve wondered about people after hearing their harsh dealings with one another or seeing their questionable interactions. My writer’s mind takes over, sometimes even before I realize it. And once that’s happened, I find myself creating scenarios about those people and the lives they lead. After all, fictional characters are often based on real life individuals. Even in fiction, our imaginations can only conjure up so much; the rest comes from an assimilation of truth.

Now, people-watching is entertaining and often a source of potential writing materials. But it wasn’t until I joined the Story Circle Network’s Internet Chapter that I realized that

some of the most beneficial people-watching I could be doing was watching myself!

Let me just say that “self-watching” is more difficult and often takes much more work than watching others. The act of writing our personal stories calls for a willingness to dig deeper. It demands that we ask the hard questions and that we be willing to face the sometimes-difficult answers to those questions.

The women of Story Circle Network’s writing e-circles are gaining more insight into what makes them tick each month as they craft their own life stories based on a variety of writing prompts. Sometimes the prompts are thought-provoking. Sometimes they are whimsical. Often the prompts can be taken at face value and stir one story from our past while for others, the desire to dig deeper produces a story of a whole different nature. But the desire to make sense of our past, to sort out our present state, or to uncover our dreams for the future—this is what keeps us writing. It is through the monthly practice of writing and sharing in our writing e-circles that we gain insight into what makes us tick. It is through those same practices that we realize that, while we each handle life in our own unique way, we share some common threads with the other women in our circle.



Membership Dues Increase April 1: Save Money and Renew Now!

After very careful consideration the Board of Directors voted in February, 2013 to increase the SCN membership dues by \$10.00, effective April 1, 2013. We did not make this decision lightly. Our membership dues no longer cover our administrative and production costs with postage and other expenses continuing to increase. This increase will allow us, among other things, to provide the quarterly journal and annual anthology in print form rather than resorting to eliminating them in favor of on-line versions only as other organizations have done. We are determined to continue providing all of the current opportunities to our writing women as well as create new services and programs. Finally, we want to continue to offer scholarships via our Sugar Bowl fund to those women who cannot afford to pay for their memberships.

The new annual dues are as follows:

*National Membership for US = \$55.00 (Canada and Mexico = \$65.00, elsewhere = \$70.00)

*Internet dues will remain the same at \$20.00

Remember regardless of when your membership is scheduled for renewal, if you renew before April 1, 2013, you can save by paying your current rate!

Pat LaPointe
President, Story Circle Network

New Faces for SCN's Board of Directors

by Pat Bean

The five new members elected to Story Circle Network's Board of Directors bring a variety of experiences to their new positions, but they all have a zest for life, and a love of writing and books. Here they are, briefly introduced in their own words.

Sharon Wildwind: *"I'm an uninhibited four-year-old in a much older body. Now that I'm retired, I'm having fun learning things like meditation, perspective drawing, and therapeutic drumming, which I never had time to learn before."*

Denise Hanshaw: *"I've been described as someone who will run through brick walls to do what needs to be done ...and as you can imagine there are a few bumps and bruises involved."*

Nancy J. Wurlitzer: *"I still feel young and want to accomplish more in what is left of my life ... My background is that of a professional meeting and event planner ... I am always the coordinator of making things happen ... I hope to bring my background and talents to SCN."*

Edith O. Nuallain: *"My passion is words, words, and more words, those written by others ... and those flowing from my own pen ... I'm a mama writer who seeks meaning, metaphor and magic in her moodlings and musings."*

Laura Strathman Hulka: *"I am a loving wife and mother ... However, I am proud to be one of a long list of feminists and public spirited women who have a strong bump of passion for the common good."*

But that's only a sampling of what these exceptional women bring to Story Circle Network's table. Here is a bit more of their stories.



Sharon Wildwind

Sharon, who lives in Calgary, Canada, joined SCN about 12 years ago because she wanted to become part of an atmosphere that would encourage and support women. Her goal as a member of the board is to help bring women together and encourage them "to document the real stories of their lives through every media possible."

It is a goal that well fits her

experiences

Sharon recently retired from a 43-year career as a registered nurse, which included a year spent as a nurse in Vietnam. She wrote a memoir about her time spent there, *Dreams that Blister Sleep*, followed by five mysteries set in

the Vietnam with a nurse as her protagonist. The latest in her Elizabeth Pepperhawk/Avivah Rosen series, *Loved Honor More*, was published in 2012.

In addition to her knowledge of writing, editing and publishing, Sharon said she also has "a lot of common sense" that she hopes will be helpful to the SCN board, along with the adventurous spirit that has taken her to other countries and unusual jobs.

Her current passions are her "wonderful husband, writing, photography, sewing, knitting, and multiple-media art." The latter, she said, is always something she would rather be doing than "decluttering" her messes. Sometimes, she said, she fools herself into treating things like household accounts and book mail-outs as art projects, "because art is fun and accounts are not so fun."

Favorite Books: Julia Cameron's books on writing, Carol Owen's *Crafting Personal Shrines*, and Sylvia Boorstein's works on meditation and joy. She is also a great fan of mystery writers Donna Andrews, Earlene Fowler, Jane Haddam, Kathy Reichs, Faye Kellerman, Lois McMaster Bujold, Margaret Coel, Margaret Marion, S.J. Rosen, Craig Johnson, and Stephen Booth.

Denise Hanshaw



Denise's primary goal for SCN is to give the organization more visibility and increase its membership because she believes in the power of women's stories. She said she became aware of this the few times her mom told her stories about her youth. "It was information I could have used in my teenage years, but she withheld it until I had my own children...or maybe I just didn't listen back."

Denise began her association with SCN by taking some of the SCN's writing classes a couple of years ago, and then attended the 2012 conference.

Helping others is what Denise believes is her current mission in life: "I think people really want to do good, but have no idea how to do it—or better yet, how easy it is to lend a helping hand. This passion gave birth to my blog, "Let's Plant a Seed"... something I am proud of," Denise said.

A happy-go-lucky person who wouldn't change a thing in her life, Denise counts as her achievements putting herself and her first husband through college, giving birth to two beautiful daughters, and currently being married to a wonderful man. The Illinois woman also hopes to write a book, or finish "one of the many that are floating in and out of my consciousness."

Favorite Books: Stephen King's *The Stand* and Erin Morgenstern's *The Night Circus*.



Nancy J. Wurlitzer

An ordained interfaith minister who enjoys performing weddings, Nancy is not just a new board member, she is also SCN's new Circles Coordinator.

Currently, she is tied pretty close to home taking care of a husband, who is suffering from WW II injuries. Most of what she does these days, she said, is done from her home office and computer. This includes her coordination of

the writing circles and helping SCN members start a circle or form one of their own.

Nancy is the mother of three and the grandmother of six, and while she makes family her number one priority, she still finds time for her spiritual duties, which include writing services and life-event ceremonies, including weddings, christenings, blessings and funeral. "I see myself as a writer-in-training," said Nancy, who hopes one day to write the one or two books she has in her.

While her ministry, however, is what she "loves doing," she is also a cosmetologist, teacher, professional model and makeup artist. "I am most proud of myself ... when I do my work. I enjoy every moment of it, and I do it with all my heart to make it be successful and rewarding for my clients, my family and myself," Nancy says. "I hope to bring my background and my talents to SCN to help all of us in one way or another"

Favorite Books: For fun, Nancy reads Debbie Macomber, Richard Evans, Nicholas Sparks and Danielle Steele. Otherwise she is always reading topics involving her ministry, or books about health, holistic healing or elder care.

Edith Ó Nualláin



This new member of SCN's Board of Directors brings an international flavor to SCN's Board of Directors. A mother of five with a love of words, Edith lives in Greystones, Ireland.

Asked what she is most proud of in her life, she responded: "I could mention my numerous book reviews published, or my bilingual poetry sitting in the middle of a literary journal squeezed onto the edge of my

bookshelf... Instead I'll say, hand on my heart, that it was the moment when I first said 'Hello little one, welcome to the world,' on the birth days of each of my five children."

As a non-American, Edith is hoping to bring a slightly different focus to Story Circle Network, and she is hoping to see the organization expand outwards with writing circles all around the world. Her goal is more than just a wish. Edith is already working with others to set up an internet chapter writing e-group whose focus will be mindful writing, a relatively new term although it is already an approach to writing that is not unfamiliar to SCN women.

Edith has a degree in philosophy, and hopes to add an MFA degree to her resume at some point. And while she's dreaming of the future, she would also like "a room of my own, with a desk set in front of a window, overlooking a mountain pass that leads to a still and dark lake in the valley below." Of course the room in which that desk would be located would also be full of books.

Her priorities for now, besides helping SCN expand, is to take some of her journal entries and translate the words into something approaching the poetry of a lyrical essay or prose poem: "In essence, to write as if my life and meaning depended upon every word written"

Favorite Books: Susan Wittig Albert for her honesty and inspiration; Anne Michaels for her poetry and her novels; Terry Tempest Williams for her attention to detail and her grittiness in telling it the way is; Louise Erdrich for her heart-achingly beautiful prose; and Eavan Bolan for showing her Irish sisters the way. Her list might be different tomorrow, she says, depending on what books she had recently read.

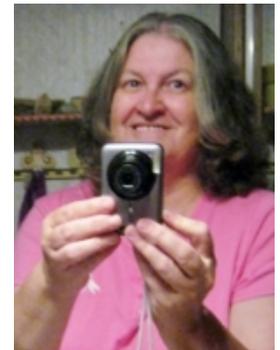
Laura Strathman Hulka

Laura joined Story Circle Network for connection, encouragement and friendship, and now hopes to bring her enthusiasm and love of women's stories to the organization's board of directors.

A fairly new member, the California resident said she was attracted to Story Circle by the sisterhood of writing women and their dedication to their craft. She is especially interested in the network's educational aspects, and hopes her computer savvy will be a help to the organization.

Laura describes herself as a loving wife and mother, but prefers to be defined "by my love of learning, and my constant search for new things in which to engage. She also said she is: "Curious, funny, reader, writer, professional reviewer, baker, crafter, crafting volunteer, liberal pacifist, spiritual feminist and Rubenesque." Writing a book is high on Laura's priorities, as is reading a lot of books and learning to be present in the moment.

Favorite Books: Too many to list, but especially books by D.E. Stevenson, Susan Wittig Albert, Susanna Kearsley, Anne Lamott, and Susan Elia MacNeal.





How to Eat an Elephant: Patricia Charpentier on Writing Your Life Story One Bite at a Time

by Lisa Shirah-Hiers

Patricia Charpentier began her writing career at the age of 14 as the “Teen Talk” columnist of her small town newspaper. She earned a bachelor’s degree in journalism from Louisiana State University and a master’s degree in creative writing from the University of Central Florida. She worked briefly as a feature writer and photographer before settling into a twenty-eight-year career in the IT side of mortgage banking. She returned to writing and became interested in her family history but realized all those who held the answers to her questions were gone. She turned her own loss into passion, ghostwriting memoirs on behalf of others, as well as co-authoring, editing, teaching and speaking. She is the author of the award-winning book, *Eating an Elephant: Write Your Life One Bite at a Time*, owner of *Writing Your Life*, a company devoted to personal and family history writing, and artist in residence at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Orlando, Florida. In May she will lead a writing workshop onboard Royal Caribbean’s *Freedom of the Seas* en route to Labadee, Haiti, Jamaica, Grand Cayman, and Cozumel, Mexico. (Visit <http://www.writingyourlife.org/writing-the-waves/>.) Lisa Shirah-Hiers interviewed her by email for the Story Circle Journal.

SCJ: Tell us a little about yourself. What do you think are the primary reasons you became a writer and a teacher?

PC: I was born in the deep bayous of South Louisiana, in the heart of Cajun Country. My relatives represented a good portion of the 400 people who lived in the tiny town of Charenton, approximately 120 miles southwest of New Orleans. When I was in my twenties, my mother gave me a copy of our family tree that dated back to 1642. I glanced at it briefly and threw it in a desk drawer. I came across the genealogy twenty years later in a move and was now fascinated by the names, dates, and places. I wanted to know more but everyone who held the stories was gone. That deep regret motivated me. I did not want anyone else to lose the opportunity to know where they came from, so I started to encourage others to write their life stories for those who came after them.

SCJ: What were some other turning points in your life journey?

PC: A huge turning point in my life occurred when I quit my job as a feature writer and photographer. It was the exact job I had wanted since I was fourteen years old, and when I gave up on it, I gave up on myself. That decision ushered in a world of hurt, and I wandered around lost, not knowing who I was or what I wanted, for ten years. From my perspective now, I can see I was afraid and didn’t know how I was going to continue to sustain the success I was experiencing. I didn’t know enough at the time to ask for help. I know it now, so fear no longer makes my decisions for me.

SCJ: What made you decide to write *Eating an Elephant: Write Your Life One Bite at a Time*?

PC: I began to hear from those in my classes, “You need to write a book. You need to be able to help people all over

write their stories.” I pushed the notion aside for many years, but in 2010, I decided I’d give it a try. I bought a stack of index cards and wrote one topic I’d like to cover in the book on each card. Every time I thought of something else, I wrote it on a card and slipped it in the pile held together with a red rubber band. When I had a stack about two inches tall, I figured I had a book. I wrote it for anyone who has a story to tell but especially for those who don’t think they have the skills to do so.

SCJ: What was the biggest challenge you faced writing it?

PC: Carving out the time to do it! In February 2010, I was laid off of my last mortgage technology job. My husband and I decided it might be time for me to try teaching and writing personal and family history as a full-time endeavor. I was starting a business, trying to make enough money writing, editing and teaching to stay afloat, marketing, saying yes to every speaking, teaching and writing opportunity that came my way. I couldn’t imagine how I’d find the time to write a book, so I did what I encouraged my students to do: write one bite at a time. I grabbed my stack of index cards and began writing the book one word, one sentence, one paragraph at a time until I finally ran out of index cards and topics.

SCJ: What is the most important message in your book?

PC: That you can’t write your life story wrong. I try to give people permission to write, to put their ninth grade English teachers who turned their papers into bloody red messes into the closet and write from their hearts, to know that whatever they write will be appreciated by someone they love, and that person won’t care if there’s a comma splice or a dangling modifier.

SCJ: What was your favorite part of writing it?

PC: I loved sharing my Cajun culture with people, writing the glossary and coming up with examples that were reflective of the people and the place where I grew up. I had a number of nice conversations with my mother as I ran some of my Cajun spellings and French words by her to make sure they were accurate. I had a lot of fun writing this book. I sought to make it entertaining and humorous as well as helpful.

SCJ: Do you have a writing practice or any special rituals?

PC: That's a good question. Between teaching, speaking, and writing for others, my own writing routinely gets shoved to the bottom of the pile. One thing I've done faithfully for more than eight years now is write in a five-year journal every night. Each night before we go to sleep, my husband, Bob, and I pull out the journal and fill in the five or six lines with the events of the day, thoughts, hopes, dreams, whatever happens to be on our mind. Then we read back over the past years—five years show up on the same page—and relive those moments together. Those few minutes each night have become a nice time for us. After not being pleased with the quality of the few five-year journals on the market, I finally published my own last year. People can read more about it on my website at <http://www.writingyourlife.org/five-year-journals-2/>.

SCJ: What are some of your favorite “bites” from *Eating an Elephant*?

PC: I love Bite #18 and its admonition to be careful with writing rituals if they involve fire. It tells a sweet story about young love and the time I burned a hole in my laptop because I was too focused on my then boyfriend, now my husband, and not on the candle I'd left burning!

Bite #104 – Stop in the Middle. This is one of the best pieces of writing advice I ever received. Instead of looking for a natural break to end a writing session, stop right in the middle of a thought. It's so contrary to my nature, but when I do it, I pick it right up the next time without a lot of running in place.

SCJ: Why do you think we “set ourselves up for failure” when we try to write our life stories chronologically from birth to the present?

PC: Our minds don't typically work in a linear fashion, so when we try to write that way, we are going against our natural creativity. I believe we have to be out of control to write well, and requiring ourselves to write chronologically forces us to write in a controlled manner. I encourage people to write what's on their heart. That's where the power is. Write now, organize later.

SCJ: What are some of your favorite ways to conjure up buried memories?

PC: Our sense of smell is so closely tied to our memories. We can use that to our advantage by seeking out scents associated with our childhoods. When I want to write about my dad who was a carpenter, I roam the aisles of Home Depot and absorb the smells of the lumber. It takes me right back to hanging out with him in his shop behind our house.

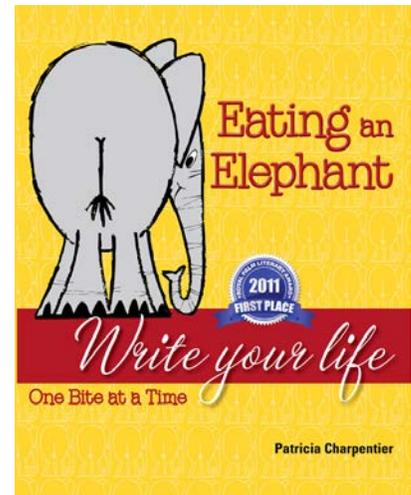
SCJ: Let's talk a little bit about voice. How can a writer find her own voice?

PC: I believe the only way a person can find his or her voice is to write. I know that sounds trite, but it's true. We can't think or wish our way into a voice; we have to write our way into it. It helps to try on different styles of writing, to mimic other writers as an exercise to see what fits and what doesn't, but in the end, our style must be our own.

Write when no one is looking. Write something that you know you'll never allow someone to read. Write for only your eyes, and through that, I believe some of your true voice can be heard.

SCJ: Describe your own journey to find your voice.

PC: I did everything they tell you not to do. I wasn't interested in sounding like me; I wanted to have a voice like some famous writer. I remember wanting to write like E.B. White. I loved his folksy, down-to-earth style. What he wrote seemed so simple and straightforward. I tried and tried to write like him. I dissected his sentences and superimposed them on my own writing, but it all fell



From *Eating an Elephant: Write Your Life One Bite at a Time*:

“Most people don't even write their life stories for fear of doing it wrong. We all have a ninth-grade English teacher sitting on our shoulders, red pen in hand, whispering in our ears, ‘What makes you think you can write?’”

“My advice? Start anywhere. Write now. Organize later.”

“You can't go wrong writing what's in your heart.”

“I often tell my friends that I don't have a memory problem; I have a filing problem. I know whatever I need is in my brain, somewhere; it's merely misfiled.”

“Making a list is one of the best ways I've found to begin eating an elephant. The bites are small, you can eat them quickly and they are easy to digest.”

“The only way to silence that critical voice is to write through it.”

“No perfect writing schedule exists; you just have to find one which works for you.”

“Writing is a creative activity; editing is a logical process, and they don't play well together.”

Continue reading on page 10



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One Bite at a Time from page 9

flat. I got so frustrated because it seemed so simple. Why couldn't I do that? I tried to be a nature writer.... I read naturalist authors, went to conferences, read how-to books, but nothing I ever wrote had a genuine feel to it. It all felt written. I finally had to quit trying to be some other writer and settle for just being me. But all those misguided attempts did me a lot of good. I learned a great deal about writing in the process and found that I was drawn to certain writers and particular writing styles because my voice shared some of the same characteristics. My voice is simple. I don't use a lot of fancy words. I write about ordinary things. I add humor in whenever possible, and I love to poke fun at myself with my words.

SCJ: What are you looking forward to these days?

PC: I'm excited about the Writing the Waves cruise. The writing workshops will be small and intimate, so everyone will get lots of personal attention with their stories. I'm also in the pre-writing stages of a workbook to go along with *Eating an Elephant: Write Your Life One Bite at a Time*. The workbook will guide people through the process of writing their life stories with specific assignments and exercises, using the contents of *Eating an Elephant* as a guide.

SCJ: Any last words for us?

PC: I always like to leave people with the motto of all my talks, classes and workshops: The only way to do this wrong is to not do it at all!

For more about Patricia, her classes, books and events visit her website: <http://www.writingyourlife.org/>.



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Story Circle Network's Book Reviews

Up In The Air

by Trilla Pando

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Let's hear it for reading whatever the medium

Up in the air, way up in the air! I looked down around 35,000 feet to see the Alps gliding by, and then I pulled out my ever-present journal and began to write this piece. Until the Alps interrupted, I'd been thinking about what to do next in my fifteen hour flight to visit my son and his family—did I mention a seven-year-old granddaughter?—in Dubai. It wasn't as if I didn't have plenty of choices, Emirates Air kindly offers more than a thousand channels of music, news commentary in many languages, audio books, and hundreds of movies. (Early in the flight, Katherine Hepburn had put me to sleep as she jostled through Adam's Rib with Spencer Tracy). But I wanted none of it. I wanted to read, and so I reached for my e-reader.

I suspected I'd be in this situation, and so I'd gone through an e-book gathering frenzy in the days leading up to our liftoff. Ten days! I told myself. How can I go without my books for ten days? Of course, I was overlooking granddaughter play-time, long conversations with a much-missed son, and doing all the amazing tourist things from checking out the world's tallest building and the world's largest shopping mall (yes, plenty of bookstore and yes, I did visit—going-home luggage will be heavier.) to walking the beach and riding camels. Did I really anticipate hours curled in a chair reading? Not really! But a reader wants to be ready.

I had recalled the Girl Scout motto, "Be prepared." I was. In the midst of my packing and gift-buying frenzy of preparation, I loaded up the Kindle. Ten days? I think I could be gone a year. I may not read my entire trove, but I have the comfort of knowing it's there if I should wake early or find a little chair-curling time.

I feel two (or more) ways about the e-reader revolution. When they first hit the market, the word was that hands-on books were doomed. Soon no one would be flipping pages, savoring the touch and smell of the books. We'd all have our readers, or our pads handy. Why have books?



When she's not reading Trilla likes to track and befriend camels.

For some, it has worked out this way; for others, no way. One of my sons won't consider a reader. Books are sacred in his household. The other son, my host this week, is at the other end of the spectrum. He no longer owns many books. All gone or just about all—he did keep a few favorites. Off to the library or the second hand store. He travels probably 80 percent of the time. He says his life changed when he got the reader. No longer

does he suffer back ache from lugging twelve books in his carryon. "How do I know what I'm going to want to read in five days?" He's got as many books as he wants at his fingertips.

My daughter is in between. She loves her Kindle. When she moved from Atlanta, like her brother she gave away books, but, unlike her brother, not all of them. She kept the ones she loves—several hundred. And she's not averse to a Sunday afternoon browsing around in a bookstore. But her reader is never far away.

That's the way I am—still up in the air over which I prefer. I love the e-accessibility. The book can go with me. I'm proving that now. Last night in jet-lag sleep confusion, my body and mind demanded a little reading at about 3 A. M. Pinkie-the-Kindle lay on the bedside table. I picked the most mind-numbing collection of short stories on the device, and thirty minutes later I was snoozing away. Fortunately, Pinkie turns herself off.

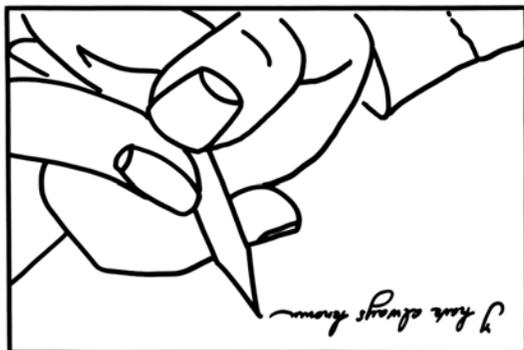
I know, though, that when I'm home in Texas next week, most likely she'll be the one snoozing on top of the bookcase waiting for our next trip or my next task with built-in waiting—maybe a trip to the dentist? At times like that I'm mighty glad she's there.

Meanwhile, I have two issues that I haven't figured out. When I see that a cookbook is available in e-format, I shudder. The idea of me, a challenging recipe and all of its ingredients together in the kitchen with a reader—I don't want to think about it. Someone told me that he puts his in a zipper bag and cooks right on. I've heard that zipper bag solution to the second problem. What about bathtub readers? True confession: I have been known to drift off in the tub sharing the water with my reading material. Knowing this risk I restrict bathtub reading to casual paperbacks and magazines. No way am I letting Pinkie in the bathtub—even in two zipper bags! If you've solved this problem, I'd love to know how!

Are you are a dedicated e-reader? Then, here's something to think about. When you need a new book, check out the Story Circle Book Review, <http://www.storycirclebookreviews.org/>, to see what's new and what's good. We review e-books as long as they also appear in print. Should you come across a new book that hasn't been reviewed there, consider joining our reviewer ranks and sharing your opinion. You can find out to do this on the SCBR site. We'll welcome you aboard!

(An earlier version of my musings on e-book vs. 'real' book appeared at <http://storycirlenetwork.wordpress.com/2012/10/25/how-do-you-vote/>)

You can reach Trilla Pando at ppando@gmail.com



True Words from Real Women

Silence

A selection of short pieces of lifewriting by our members, edited by Mary Jo Doig. Contribute your own True Words to the Journal. Future topics are listed on page 28.

Quiet Delights and Soft Surprises

Ronda Armstrong, Des Moines IA
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For most of my school social work career in central Iowa, I traveled from home to home and school to school. After a stop I stowed my briefcase and bags in my car and headed to the next destination. I did not click on the radio or pop in a musical CD, a talking book, or a motivational tape. I chose to drive in silence, accompanied by the whir of the engine, the thump of the tires on the street, and the intermittent honk of a car horn or a radio blaring from other vehicles.

Growing up with hearing loss, I learned to value silence, mediating between the desire to participate and the pull to unplug from the busyness of daily life and the hard work of hearing. With quiet, I heard more. My voice from within spoke up. Settling into my career, I started the habit of driving in silence to give me quiet interludes between interactions.

The sanctuary of my car offered respite after noisy classrooms, crowded hallways, and conversations with parents, teachers, and kids. I enjoyed my job and the resulting good from uncovering strengths of others and devising solutions to concerns. Although communications and too much noise exhausted me, silence saved me. The enforced quiet revived me, restoring energy for the following appointment.

Now retired, I continue viewing my car as a quiet environment when driving alone. Also similar to my career days, I intersperse quiet activities with interactive ones.

For varied reasons some view silence as too difficult, too disturbing, too somber. Tuning in to life's raw essence may be unsettling. Easier perhaps to dull the senses and turn on the din: the music, TV, radio, iPod.

When I leave gadgets off and limit noisy distractions, I hear the hum of the furnace or the refrigerator, the creak of the cupboard door, the chimes of the clock. Giving space to quiet delights and soft surprises honors my spirit deep within, the one who speaks when I stay silent, ready to listen.

Being Still

Marian McCaa Thomas, Leawood KS
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When Scott and I decided to try silent meditation, we didn't even know if we could sit still for twenty minutes. Following suggestions from a Benedictine website, we two Protestants set aside time twice a month to give silence a try. We each chose a mantra to repeat to ourselves silently. Mine was "Deep Peace." As I exhaled I thought "deep," and as I inhaled, "peace." At first my thoughts darted here and there. I kept forgetting to say my mantra. Even though my eyes were closed I was aware of the flickering flame in the oil lamp. Aches and itches made me notice my physical body while I was trying to notice only my breathing. Gradually I got better at being still. After six months we decided that silent meditation was so refreshing and calming, we would do it every week and extend the time of silence to thirty minutes. That decision was made over ten years ago. From time to time others joined our little group, coming and going as their needs demanded. Scott and I, however, have remained faithful to the practice.

What happens in the silence? Breathing slows down. Muscles relax. Tensions disappear. At times I "see" purple or deep blue shapes. Sometimes a door appears: is it a door through which I must go to be closer to God? Sometimes there is an expanding circle, with waves like an aurora borealis. Sometimes there is nothing but a sense of being part of something greater than myself. A few years ago a new word came to me to use as my mantra: shalom. It is the Hebrew word for peace-wholeness-good health. If one says the "sha" aloud, an oscilloscope shows waves going up and down; it is a noisy syllable. The oscilloscope shows a flat line, indicating no noise, when the second syllable, "lom" is sounded. It is close to the "om" of meditating Buddhist monks. I breathe out during "sha," letting go of tension, anger, fear and resentment, and breathe in during "lom," welcoming relaxation, peace, gratitude and joy. These are the gifts of silence.

Note: The author highly recommends "Friends of Silence," at www.friendsofsilence.org

A Lioness Named Kia

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I always struggled to silence my cluttered, voice filled mind, until I learned the art of silence from the unlikeliest of sources: a lioness named Kia who was kept at my local zoo. I visited the zoo often and would always see her, but I only stayed for a moment before moving on to the next enclosure until the day Kia did something amazing.

That day when I arrived at her enclosure Kia was napping, yet she must have sensed my presence because she woke up and looked directly into my eyes with a concentration I had never seen before. I was paralyzed as I stared into her deep amber eyes. She held eye contact with me constantly and was not distracted by any activity. The voices in my head, which had been noisily chattering away before, paused. As we continued with locked gazes, my inner dialogue was quieted due to my sheer awe at the majesty of the stunning golden lioness staring directly into my very soul. Kia was the epitome of stillness, silence, and grace personified in a living, elemental being, traits that I had been struggling to learn. Before I knew it, the minutes had become hours and the next thing I knew the zoo was closing. As if realizing our time was over, Kia rose and walked to the door of her night enclosure. During that afternoon with Kia all of my worries, stresses, and fears had receded and I had unknowingly entered a calm and meditative state communing with her.

I began to visit Kia on a weekly basis. I looked forward to my time with her because I learned how to calm my inner voices, and achieve a state of silence in her presence. Time passed and Kia has moved on to the Great Savannah in the sky, but I continue to find silence in my mind when I need it by picturing Kia's golden coat and deep amber eyes staring into mine; and that is how I learned the art of silence from a lioness.

Solace

Mary Devries, Hutchinson KS
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 w-ecircle 6

Still silver lights
 Flit across the panes and floor
 Moon tides made visible

I sit
 Knees to chin
 Surrounded by nothingness
 Opening my soul
 Drifting from the weary world
 To the splendor
 Of the solace found in
 Silence.

Illuminating Silence

Renita Collier, Glenn Heights TX
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 w-ecircle 13

The aroma of rich, Columbian coffee fills the air as the pot drips the last of the life-saving liquid into the carafe. The electric heater hums as it radiates heat and casts an eerie glow about the dark, shadow-filled room. These pre-dawn hours, alternating between the conscious and unconscious mind, are my favorite of the day. Life's secrets lay waiting in the silence if we choose to listen.

Some people fear that silence. They fill each waking moment with activity: television, radio, and companionship. No time left for reflection or introspection. I, on the other hand, relish this most spiritual time. My mind meanders through the days of years gone by, lurking through doorways of old haunts, visiting long lost relationships. I rewrite the scripts of old arguments, wishing I had spoken less and listened more. I envision the "what might have been" if only I had not been so hasty to judge. Reenacting these scenarios, I avow to become more thoughtful and merciful.

At other times, I sit in silence and look to the future. I allow my muse to call herself a writer and visualize all the stories that are within me. Valuable stories of my childhood, tales of innocence lost, give glimpse into the person I've become. Anecdotes of parenthood with all my inadequacies and imperfections, and the struggles to raise a mentally ill child, elucidate my perseverance. Stories of physical assaults and emotional abuse delivered by my husband depict me as a survivor. One day I will add stories of the "empty nester" as I muddle through my waning years.

When I visit these more spiritual realms, I reexamine my soul. Through the silence, I battle the demons, and write to conquer and release them. I see where I am flawed, and make mental notes to correct those defects. Only through that quiet, reserved time can my inner self feel free to experience pain, sorrow, happiness, love, forgiveness, and mercy. It is only through the illuminating silence can my muse run free and learn about me.

Shhh

Amy Greenspan, Austin TX
 w-ecircle 4 and Austin Reading Circle

Meditate
 Find a space
 between the brain halves
 where it's quiet

Logic from the left
 Feelings from the right
 funnel into silence
 Simply be

Retreat

Samantha M. White, Nokomis FL
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I am learning how to sit zazen, silent meditation. People poised in the lotus position surround me on the floor of the large hall. I am on a low kneeling bench, which is kinder to my joints. We have all been sitting, walking, and eating together—slowly, deliberately, and without speaking—for two days. I am bursting with the need to connect verbally. I want to turn to the woman next to me and say, “Hi! This is my first time, is it yours?” I want to phone people, tell them about this strange place, where everyone moves at a snail’s pace. Torrents of thoughts and feelings—boredom, anger, sadness—assail me. I squirm and struggle to sit still, feeling trapped. This is agony. *Where is the peace?* I wonder.

By the third day, walking slowly feels more comfortable. I breathe more deeply. Sitting in the meditation hall, I begin to notice things: flowering plants on the windowsills, colors in the carpet, tension in my shoulders. I mentally step back and observe, as if from a point outside myself, the feelings that come and go through me, and find that easier. During walking meditation I pause beside a window and look out at the lawn. My gaze travels slowly upward along the thick trunk of an old tree. Suddenly the whole tree, with its dense thicket of branches and leaves glowing brilliant green, explodes into being before my eyes. I am stunned. I feel as though I am seeing a tree for the first time, and it shouts itself to me. I am dazzled by its majestic presence.

On the drive home afterward, the sensory input to my eyes and ears is overwhelming. Traffic roars at me, roadside signs scream their messages. I get lost several times. The road home hasn’t changed; it is I who have changed. By lowering the volume and speed of my life, I have begun to hear, see, and feel more clearly, more than I ever realized was there.

I miss the lovely silence, and the sound of my own breath.

The Way to Go

Liz Elkins, Oklahoma City OK

Well, I used silence in my marriage. I learned that from watching my parents. It would drive me crazy.

I didn’t think my husband would listen so I wrote a story; he got the message and came to see me and we talked. He told me what he thought I should do. I didn’t agree but I was scared to disagree with him, so I took his suggestions. I wish I hadn’t. I wish I had been strong enough to stand on my own two feet and do what I wanted and not what he wanted.

Now it’s going on eleven years that I’ve been divorced; we’d been married thirteen years. I was silent when he turned to me and said, “Get out.” I couldn’t believe my ears. There were so many things I wanted to say but didn’t. He wouldn’t have heard me anyway. So silence was the way to go.

The Secret

Tina Bausinger, Tyler TX
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I’m not as confident as I seem
But the road doesn’t know that
It simply is
Hard and smooth beneath my shoes
As I start my morning run
I’m not as sure as I seem
But the road doesn’t know that
It stretches out before me
Like a string of unbroken promises
A morning just ready to begin
I’m not as strong as I seem
But the road doesn’t know that
It waits for me like a familiar friend
Nonjudgmental, yet
All-knowing
I hurt, I ache, I mourn
But the road doesn’t know that
Nor does it care
It simply is
Every day the same, a constant star
This I know for sure
I can’t go any farther
But the road doesn’t know that
It beckons me on, encouraging me
To break my record
Test my limits
Prove to myself I can do better
That’s the secret
between the road and I

The Symphony of Big Bend

Jo Virgil, Austin TX
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Wordweavers Writing Circle, Austin TX

Did you come here seeking silence?
It seems you made a wrong turn.
Here is an entire symphony
Played subtly, softly, but distinctly.
The wind in the pines carries the rhythm,
Sharing the cycles of nature,
The wave of all that is, or shall be.
Sometimes an aspen adds a crescendo,
Then softly settles back down,
Having sung to the sky all that needed to be sung.
Water and stone join essence
With one voice between them—
The ultimate harmony of nature.
Dancing sunlight on rippling water
Adds sight to sound—music of its own.

Listen! The coyote’s howl, the cry of a hawk.
Listen! Footsteps of thirsty deer.
Listen! A butterfly landing on thistle.
Listen! The sound of your own heart
Playing in tune to an eternal symphony.

Not Always Golden

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For most of us silence conjures peaceful, quiet moments. Perhaps when we think of silence, we think of it as a quiet corner of our world when we can sit on a beach and enjoy watching the spectacular pink and orange hues of a sunset as it paints its colors across the water and then dips past the edge of the horizon into the sea.

Silence is softly tiptoeing into a sleeping child's room to watch the wonder of that child as it slumbers peacefully, with breaths quietly and slowly measured in and out, in and out.

Silence is watching snow falling, grateful to be inside a warm place with a good book and a hot cup of coffee while looking out to see the snow as it covers everything in sight with a fresh, white blanket.

But silence is not always golden. Silence also hides secrets. Secrets that are too embarrassing to be told. Secrets that are too dangerous to be told. Victims of domestic violence know of this silence all too well. For some, silence is the only way they know to be able to stay alive.

In years past, speaking out against violence toward another family member's or neighbor's life was taboo. Just mind your own business, we were told. Don't stick your nose where it doesn't belong. It's between them. Just be quiet. Just be silent.

Thank goodness much of that has changed. A victim doesn't have to suffer in silence any longer although many still do. Threats of even more abuse are made to silence the victim if she dares to tell anyone.

Today, if we suspect someone we know is being abused, we need to let them know that there is help out there for them. They are not alone. We need to let them know they can safely talk to someone.

We need to give them the opportunity to break that silence.

SILENCE PLEASE!

Tiffany Benton, Port Townsend WA
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w-ecircle 7

Silence: The absence of audible sound—Wikipedia

SILENCE PLEASE!

Thoughts screaming in my head, worry, anxiety, fear, darkness

Heart pounding, muscles tightening, heat rising

SILENCE PLEASE!

Holding my breath

Images looping back around

Oh No not again...

Visions of unimaginable outcomes

Unreal I think?

SILENCE PLEASE!

Sleep, I just want sleep, to hide

Exhaustion

I should know better, make these thoughts stop!

SILENCE PLEASE!

Panic?

"No" a very small voice says

Courage!

COURAGE?

Breathing deepens

Heart slows

Muscles relax

Again—breathe deep—light!

Courage!

Ahhhhh. Silence.

Silencing a Marriage

D. Maya Lazarus, Milford PA
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He would come home from work carrying his silence with him. We had only been married a few years. I would try to cajole him into speaking. "What's wrong? Did something happen at work? Did I do something wrong?" He would answer that he didn't feel like talking. A few hours I could understand, but this went on for several days. I would make his favorite meals, arrange his comfy chair in just the right position, and sit beside him to watch TV. But the silence expanded and echoed throughout our home.

Did you know that silence could have an echo? An echo of anger and hostility. But why was it directed toward me? I

never understood. I screamed in frustration during the day when he was not around. I cried quietly into my pillow at night from the pain of not getting through to him.

Eventually, the silence broadened like the mighty Mississippi and overflowed its banks, ending our marriage. The night that I told him we were finished, he tried to silence me with a chokehold. But as you can see, I survived to tell you this story.

Quiet is Waiting

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 w-ecircles 1 and 14

Time spent in surgical waiting rooms has been more rule than exception in the past few years of my husband's illness. As usual, I have come with my book and journal today and I am yearning for enough noise reduction to allow focus for reading or writing. As I shift my attention to sharper awareness of my surroundings, I see ten patients and staff at the registration desk in a room not much larger than my living room. There is a circus of activity and noise. A few patients vie for being heard in conversation over the volume of bickering on *The View*, trumpeting across the room in stereo from two large screen wall mounted television sets. I count a total of five people waiting, with hand held devices beeping and clicking. The registrars speak loudly to those signing in while doors on opposite sides of the room open and close to nurses calling the names of patients.

If I step outside the building seeking respite from this cacophony, there is the noise of city streets: passing cars vibrating with rap and bass, delivery trucks rattling along, brakes squealing, sirens screaming.

Ear plugs are used for finding sound rather than blocking it. Any small spaces of soundlessness seem to be filled by cranking up the volume of music, radio talk shows, and even audio books, as if it is feared that by leaving any quiet space we might hear a still small voice and do not want to know what it says.

Ambience of silence is rare today. I find it only when deliberate, intentional, and disciplined in its pursuit. Finding silence may mean the treasure hunt of stillness and solitude. That may be what some flee most: being alone. But when I return home today, I will leave the sounds of dishwasher and telephone and TV to sit on the sun warmed stone wall of my herb garden. I will breathe deeply, listening for silence and finding it somewhere beyond the birdsong and rustling grasses. The quiet is waiting for me.

Sounds of Silence

Carol Ziel, St. Louis MO
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 w-ecircle 6

Medallion moon breaks night's silence
 Pinned to the sweet spring sky it summons the song of locusts
 Music pulses back to the moon
 Light swelling like a jar full of fire flies
 Stars cram the sky
 Sequins twinkling on a celestial prom dress
 Fabric of deep blue filament wrapping itself
 Around the stars, the moon, and me
 Returning us all to the sounds of silence.

Louder Than Thunder, More Quiet Than Snow

Barbara Youngblood Carr, Austin TX
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In a room, laid out on cold metal tables,
 sheets covered my parents up to their chins
 so that only their faces were visible.
 I'd been told I'd feel better if I went
 in to see them and pay my last respects,
 if only for a few seconds, but I didn't.
 I've never forgotten what I saw
 in that room so many years ago.
 They had heavy makeup on their faces.
 My Father's nose, which had always been crooked,
 had been straightened. My Mother's face
 had deep worry and pain wrinkles
 around her brow and nose that had been there before.
 She had not died peacefully as I had been told.
 I left that room quickly.

Alone, I have listened to dead leaves
 rattling down cold, windy streets
 on winter nights during the Vietnam War
 while I waited to hear footsteps
 of a loved one who might never return.
 I have heard my own silence in the dark
 when I have been afraid, trying not to breathe
 so I wouldn't be discovered by whatever was there.
 But the loudest heartbeats, tears and mourning
 I ever heard were in that room.

I once watched thick snow fall softly, silently,
 onto giant fir trees in Germany's Black Forest.
 There was no sound there; even the wind was still.
 But the whitest, most quiet silence I ever heard
 was in that room where my parents lay together in death.

Letter to Mary

Darlene Hayman, Montrose CO
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A silent wind blew over from Utah to greet us
 and covered the valley below
 with snow the color of milky white down.

Under a colorless sky, over the valley of pine and spruce,
 snow washed over the winter palette,
 Soundless as a lustrous drape of satin.

The valley seems peaceful at night and yet,
 loud or silent cries of children can be heard.
 A slap, a harsh comment, a stony shush, or not knowing
 if there will be dinner on the table tonight.
 What can be done to quiet the children who are crying?

The Soundlessness of Silence

Sara DuBois, Renton WA
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w-ecircles 7 and 14

Remembering *The Sounds of Silence* by Simon and Garfunkel

I cannot say how much I understood about it then...

But later on, I did understand. *Silence*.

She had breast cancer for three years and she knew precisely what would happen

She would be eaten up by the disease... Death would overtake her

Just as it had with Don, my dad. *Silence*.

Going to the doctors, getting chemo treatments, working and living.

Life slowly ebbing away, bodily functions embarrassingly failing,

Staying with my Aunt Inez and Uncle Bob in their home. *Silence*.

Mom has been reading a book about someone named Mrs. Tricklefoot

She calls my aunt to help her get up to go facilitate and jokes:

"Well, here goes Mrs. Tricklefoot again!" They both laugh! *Silence*.

My Grampa Boots dies in mid-October of 1969, complications of Alzheimers.

My aunt had the brunt of the care-taking responsibility for two.

My uncle's heart is breaking... no outlet for his pain. *Silence*.

December arrives and they try hard to prepare for the holidays.

They will have their kids and grandkids there, so a tree is up.

They have not decorated it yet... too hard. *Silence*.

Mom admitted to the hospital from the nursing home...

It is near to time predicted by Mom's physician...

She has gone into a coma. *Silence*.

The call me and tell me to come up from San Jose to Tacoma.

I go by Greyhound and have the flu

My arrival is at about 3 pm. *Silence*.

She had died. She no longer is. We make the "arrangements" for Mom.

"Arrangements" for their dog Cindy, too, to be put to sleep.

How much more can we handle? *Silence*.

I can never hug, see, hear or speak to them again. A huge hole in my chest.

Where they had once been. I ache to hear their stories again, hold them.

See them. In my dreams only. Such a profound forever *Silence*.

Silence

Marion Hunt, Berkeley CA
w-ecircle 6

Trapped words

Unable to be spoken

Outside their bodily boundaries.

Fearful of the audience.

Screeching.

Howling,

Blood curdling noises,

Heart pounding screams.

Racing pulse.

Stampeding barefoot

Against cracked, sharp-edged,

Pock-marked and pebbled pavement.

Raging,

Tears streaming untold feelings,

Tears held back,

Whispering

Release me!

Words,

Words crashing into phrases,

Long, captive speeches,

Deep emotions

Begging

To be heard.

Silence.

Noisy,

Wildly crazy,

Tortured,

Angry,

Silence.

My Ravaged Heart

Janice Peveto, Lockhart TX

The silence was overpowering. Whether at work, a football game, the grocery store, or home, the silence of my heart was deadening.

My children had spread their wings and left the nest, soaring to reach their own dreams. My soulmate, my husband, was supposed to grow old with me. But he had been torn from my arms by the angel of death. I was alone in my cold, silent hell.

Friends came by and called. Children came home for weekend visits. Weddings were planned and executed to perfection. Career success continued. But the silent desperation was all I heard.

Years passed with no sounds of birds chirping, no laughter in the park, no voices raised in prayers of thanksgiving, no whispers of endearment at bedtime to

soothe my ravaged heart.

Then miraculously, a beautiful baby was placed in my arms. As I looked into the eyes of my newborn grandchild, the winds of a new beginning stirred my heart. I heard the soft strands of life's melody and the awakening of my spirit as I arose from the ashes of my grief—a phoenix rising to the symphony of love and life renewing.

The beautiful grandbabies are no longer babies. They are beginning to spread their wings, ready to race off the cliff to catch the wind beneath their wings and soar.

The gratitude and joy I feel for having the gift of love restored is without measure. The silence I hear now is peace and love, broken by the random clash of cymbals as the orchestra of life begins a new movement.

Silence

Patricia Roop Hollinger, Westminister MD
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“Another shooting spree resulted in the deaths of three family members,” is the report from the *Today Show*, as I attempt to begin a new day with a positive outlook on life. Click! I lift all concerned into the light for whatever is needed in the midst of such tragedy. What were the hopes and dreams of these people whose lives were cut short by one act of apparent nonsensical violence? No more television today. I need silence to ponder such atrocities that are occurring with such frequency.

I will take a walk to clear my mind and soul of the injury to my own heart upon hearing this news. The bombardment of the “whirring and buzzing” of the weed whackers around the homes in my retirement community greet me. Now my nerves feel as though they are going to explode through my skin. I need silence to restore my spirit to a state of peace and tranquility.

“The walk will come later in the day,” I tell myself as I escape back into my apartment complex. In the hallway I am greeted by another dweller with, “Did you know that Martha fell down the steps last night and broke her hip?” I was not aware of that event. “I am seeking silence,” I mutter to myself.

Ah! I am almost to my doorway when there is this blaring repetitive “ding, ding, ding,” from the fire alarm system. Wonderful gadget when there is truly a fire, tornado, or hurricane, but there was neither in this case. You always wonder though. Just a ritual practice I suppose. I just need silence!

In time the “practice” ended. The remainder of my day is spent in total silence to restore my mind and spirit to a place of quiet and peace in the midst of a technological world that so desperately needs the healing that only silence can bring.

Winter

Juliana Lightle, Canyon TX
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The deer meander along the canyon rim,
stop to browse bare bushes
in silence.

The bobcat climbs the canyon wall,
surveys his rugged realm
in silence
The coyotes run above the rim
watchful, wary
in silence.

Now, in January, the birds stop to drink
from the blue birdbath, bobbing
in silence.

At night, the stars and moon
illuminate my sleep
in silence.

(Editor's note: The following poem contains language that may be objectionable to some. I discussed this with the journal editor and other SCN members. Even though we realize this word is offensive to many, we decided to include it, because the writer is using it as a way to break her silence, like hammering on a wall. She might have found another way, but this is her way. We, as lifewriters, want to hear and we want to listen. If readers want to skip stanza 4 and not listen to that part, they can. Or they can read it and consider what happens to readers and writers when we use that word. MJD)

Echoes of Silence

Janet E. Harris, Austin TX

The word “silence” makes me uneasy, it takes me back to childhood and too many times of anxiously waiting in the silence, not knowing.

After the yelling, fighting, and fury subsided, I listened, trying hard to not make a sound: Is the danger past for now? When will it start again?

Silence in my world then was spent crouching like a scared mouse in the tiny, little hole of my own frightened soul. So alone.

The fucked up past, the fucked up now, and the fucked up future. A fucked up triumphvirate. Thanks for that, mom and dad.

I love you, still, I swear. You know that. You weren't bad parents, of course not. I'd swear it on the Bible in a court of law. It's true.

That bad time was all in childhood, was mostly all in childhood—but all so many years ago. Now my hair is turning gray.

I'm growing old. And need to grow wise again, like I used to be when I was very young. I was the still water which no pebble could disturb.

What can you do when your memories are not what you'd like to have? Squelch them, keep them down, don't give them a voice.

Keep them silent. Silent like the grave, silent like God?

And still, I hear awful things sometimes in the silence. People not speaking up when they should. People turning away, blocking out what they don't want to hear.

Silence can be golden, but silence can also be miserable and even full of the murderous treachery of unspoken complicity.

I felt that no one really wanted to hear or listen to what I had to say as a child. And I tried to do my part and keep my pain and true feelings inside.

But I do have a voice, and I do have a heart and a soul still after all these many years, after so much trying not to make a sound or be a bother.

Is anyone listening? Does anyone care? Helloo... helloo... helloo...

Memories and Ghosts

Sara Etgen-Baker, Allen TX
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In the two days since my arrival, my grandfather and I have exchanged only a few predictable, cursory words.

“Here’s your cereal. No milk, right?”

“Right, Granddad. Thanks.”

“You sleep okay?”

Although his silent house kept me awake, I respectfully replied, “Yes sir. I did,” followed by, “How ‘bout you?”

“I’m old. I never sleep well... too many memories and ghosts.”

I struggled with what to say while we ate breakfast, as silence—awkward and heavy—permeated the house.

Afterwards, I plopped down into my grandmother’s chair. The lilt of her lavender perfume lingered in the rich tapestry fabric, reminding me of the times when I sat in her lap reading a book or sharing hot cocoa. When my grandmother was alive, the house was full of noise and laughter.

Now, though, the house was lifeless and silent, and I wondered why my mother had sent me to visit my grandfather. As I searched for ways to shatter the silence, I thought about my mother’s cryptic parting words, “Remember this visit is not about you.”

He glanced up from reading his newspaper. “Your grandmother loved sitting in that chair and watching her grandchildren.”

“I loved sitting in her lap when she sat in this chair.” I watched his face. “It still smells like her.”

“Yes, it does.” He adjusted his glasses. “Her memory keeps me awake at night.”

I choked and tearfully responded, “The silence at night frightens me and makes me miss her more.”

“I miss her too.” He peered over his glasses. “In the silence I hear her voice and feel her spirit. I’m afraid I’ll lose her forever if the house isn’t silent.” His voice cracked as he said, “After death the departed live on in the shadows of our lives, like memories and ghosts.”

The silence, now shattered, allowed us to share our grief and to touch each other’s souls. At that moment, he understood that I feared silence because it amplified the void my grandmother had left behind. Although I feared silence, I now understood how it allowed him to fill that same void with her memory.

Afternoon

Trilla Pando, Houston TX

Worn out, toddlers nap
Mom grabs book, savors silence.
Those messes can wait.

Dad’s First Seder

Sandra Simon, Austin TX
Sharing our Stories Writing Circle, Austin TX

Mother was quiet, but Dad!—he always seemed excited and noisy. Early in the morning after reading the paper, he was on the phone, yelling. Going to the factory or going fishing, he raced out of the house, slamming the den door. As he drove, he sang, “Oh, island in the sun...” He commanded us: “Come, come quickly! Wake up! Sleep on your own time! Look at those geese flying! Smell! I’m making special eggs and salami!” When he was angry, he shouted for Mom, “Honey! Honey!”

He had always insisted that we go to his older brother Uncle Sol and Aunt Sally’s home for the seder, the Passover meal.

“We must be with Family!”

Why? I knew he and Sol argued bitterly, screaming at one another. For my sisters and me, those Passover gatherings were long, boring, and tense, filled with pitfalls for humiliation from our sarcastic uncle and Hebrew-proficient cousins. And Dad would look nervous and on guard, watching his brother.

Then one year something changed: we would make seder at our house. Mom prepared the many dishes for the festive dinner. In the dining room, beneath the chandelier my parents loved, we set the table: a white tablecloth, the rarely-seen good china, the holiday candles.

We sat down, just our family, Dad at the head of the table. He poured the dark wine, lifted his glass and prayer book, and sang about three syllables, before he stopped—silent, unable to continue—and began to cry.

We stared dumbfounded at him. Nobody knew what to say or do.

We pushed away, left the room, then remained quiet, hardly moving.

After what seemed a long while, he returned. “What’s the matter?” he asked, “can’t a man cry when he has his first seder with his own family in his own home?”

The spell of fear was broken. Mother, my sisters, and I all talked at once, “Of course, yes, of course, you can.” Still a little uneasy, I raised my grape juice with him as he began again, telling the ancient story of deliverance from oppression.

Write Time

Trilla Pando, Houston TX

Dogs bark, radio blares—
nothing breaks the silence
of my concentration.

Waiting

Ana Aviles, Lockhart TX

I am with my son in the ICU burn section on the sixth floor of the hospital.

He is lying there helpless in front of me. He is in an induced coma with burns over ninety percent of his body. He cannot move. He cannot talk. Silence absorbs every minute of life.

The doctors tell me we must wait to see if he will make it the next thirty minutes.

Shock is silence.
Then we must wait an hour.
Trauma is silence.
Then a day.
Sadness is silence.
Then two.
Anger is silence.
Then a week.
Praying is silence.
Then two weeks.
Waiting is silence.

When his body is strong enough, they start skin grafts but he remains in an induced coma.

Silence, silence is always screaming at me. Silence allows the voices in my head to scream out my hurt with my mouth shut. Silence lets the demons feed my doubts. It leaves me powerless. It robs me of the hope that could turn into faith.

My son survived.

Silence of the Ages

Annabelle Bailey, Southbury CT
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w-ecircle 4

For at least fifty years I longed for silence
from you
words words words
empty platitudes courtly pleasantries
cloaking your shuttered, wounded soul

Words words words
You gave what you got
Audience interruption not appreciated; applause welcome
I sat with bowed head my soul drowning in your
words words words needs words words

Now it's my turn to talk
Irreverent game of charades
completing your halting phrases with
words words words words words
Finally
Huge
Yawning
silences

The Wedding

Jessica Meador, Lockhart TX

The autumn weather is perfect for an outdoor wedding. The community center is filled with music and laughter as family and friends gather to celebrate the wedding many had predicted ten years prior.

As you view the scene, you notice your parents dancing, completely immersed in one another. They are the picture of unity and unconditional love. Your new son squeals with laughter and announces to all who will listen that he got married too!

The dinner is underway and you take in the simple beauty of the candlelight and faces aglow with the promise of love. Yet... for you ...silence.

Silence. How can there be silence in the midst of a wedding reception? Especially when you are the bride. You realize it is possible to speak a multitude of words and, yet, remain silent. In all the words of hope, celebration, and joy, silence remains.

The oppressive silence wonders what the future truly holds—or worse, the fear you already know what is coming. It is nothing that was promised that day. It is the silence of knowing that, while you smile for the wedding photos that will grace the walls of your home, you are strategically angling yourself to ensure the bruises are hidden.

There is an inner chaos of wanting so desperately to talk to your mom and be reassured of her belief in your happily ever after. But you remain silent because you know the truth and you fear that if she looks into your eyes, she will know it too.

Instead, the words continue. The chatter, the laughter, the music, the celebration continue. The truth remains in the silence.

Tyranny of Silence

Janice Kvale, Austin TX
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w-ecircle 6, r-ecircle 1

sound and silence
forever wedded opposites
coexist on both sides
of a glass cocoon
our shield
from cacophony
silently
little boys are raped
silently
mothers bleed to death
silently
women are beaten
no one hears
the abandoned, discarded,
nonexistent, tormented souls
the world passes by
sees, hears, says nothing
protected in a cocoon named
silence

Now Only Silence

Karen Dabson, Columbia MO
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In the spring of the year,
 In the spring of her life,
 Now only silence
 Creeps around the room,
 Stills the monitor's buzz,
 Mutes the overhead lights, and
 Capes our shoulders in shadow as it
 Seeps up the sheets of her bed.

Our ears strain for
 The pad of nurses' feet
 The clank of the food cart
 The clink of glass vials, and
 The puff of her breathing.

Now only silence
 Cracks on our ears,
 Breaks in our hearts,
 Staccatos our breath.
 She is gone.

Now, only silence.
 Silence only,
 Nothing more.

Winter Wood

Nancy Jurka, Palmer Lake CO

I awake to rays prancing
 from eastern prairie to western mountain,
 changing textured fabric from autumn to winter.
 Snowscaped, the forest hushes
 falling leaves as geese fly over.
 Ancient trees in gray-scarred wood
 frosted white by freezing night air,
 not yet warmed by amber sun.

My hand pushes open the heavy door;
 to see red scrub oak leaves
 and aspen gold warped by the cold.
 I attempt to edge away the brittleness
 of this sudden change of season
 as a river of wind whips my clothes
 and waters my eyes.

There is nothing to cling to
 except for a broken fence post near the house
 exposing secrets and dreams in splintered wood.
 I do not need to find something new;
 but an urge to shove through a path of snow drifts
 makes me cackle like blue-black crows
 cracking open the silent morning sky.

Hearing the kettle's call for breakfast tea,
 I step back inside to shut out
 the coming rough season, letting me welcome
 a warmth of solitude on my numbing face.

Beyond All the Words

Sharon Lippincott, Monroeville PA
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My mind monkey is manic, stoking fire under word pot.
 Seething, roiling, bursting word pot. Dammed words.
 Damned words. Damning words. Fear. Desire. Hurting.
 Anger. Round and round they go in that pot. My head is
 black inside. Surely I shall burst. Maybe I will scream.

Instead, I reach for my journal and plop into a chair.
 Cover suede feels soothing. Fingers linger on silky ribbon.
 The vast white expanse of empty pages is calming, blankly
 serene—an empty repository, safe and welcoming: Give me
 your words. I'm here to hold your words, safely for ages.
 Empty your heart here.

I obey muse voice, pick up pen and begin to write.

My words feel tight and tense, letters are sharp, monkey
 chatter spikey. Thought fragments slide from the page
 unfinished.

Just keep writing. Keep hand moving. Keep writing.
 Keep writing.

Margin doodles keep hand moving. What shall I write?
 What shall I write? Nothing feels coherent.

Relax into the process. Have faith in the process. Yes.
 Relax. Have faith. The process always works.

My pen feels warmer and point glides across page.
 Words pour onto paper. Letters loosen, words slow, become
 steady, then pick up speed. Steam builds. Words tumble,
 babble, rush, gush, push onto the page. A word-flake
 blizzard blankets paper sheets, piling into images, concepts,
 dreams. Sun bursts forth, waking hope, joy, gratitude, and
 forgiveness.

Breathing deepens; shoulders drop. Muscles melt.
 Words slow to a ripple. Monkey words have moved to page.
 Word pot is empty, fire out. Monkey is fast asleep.

“Beyond all the words is a place of great silence.”

I am in that place. I sit still, breathing deeply, treasuring
 silence, grateful for the blessing of pen and paper. Words
 will return, soon enough. For now, they are safe on the page.
 Life is good. Let there be silence.

Winter's Morning

Marjorie Kildare, Guysborough NS
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Ethereal mornings
 In winter's snowy slumber
 In the great and glorious
 Church-like hush
 Silence reigns.

My Mobius Circle of Silence

Barbara Miller, Austin TX
Millwood Writing Circle

Stifling silence was the norm in the home I grew up in. The absence of music, reading, religious and political conversation, and social interaction became the roots of my own rebellion as a teenager. Junior High years, in the early 1950s, saw me bring Bill Haley and the Comets, Glen Miller, and Patti Page into that silent abode.

A brief inkling of the power of silence came in the summer of 1956 at the foot of Baptism Falls, three miles into the northern Minnesota woods, just off of the North Shore Drive of Lake Superior. As I walked the trail I began to hear the silence of the woods, the quiet of the lush forest around me. The silence of solitude tapped me on the shoulder and led me to perch on a large rock at the base of the falls. My companions disappeared. I was there alone. Looking back I can see that I was in a complete state of "mindfulness." It awakened my soul.

Freedom in silence was found during a week of silent retreat in 1996 at St. John's Monastery in Collegeville, Minnesota. Exhausted from the parties of a high school class reunion weekend, I followed the host monk to the small, spare room that would be my home for the next week. After four hours alone I heard the dinner bell calling me to a silent dinner among my fellow pilgrims. The only sound I made that week was when joining with the antiphonal choir of monks for morning and evening prayers. It was a beautiful time of struggle, joy, and revelation, a time for listening to the silence.

Today I live on the mobius, unending circle of love and hate that silence brings into my life. The stifling place of loneliness circles me back to the freedom of creative expression. My appreciation for and need for solitude feeds my writing, my relationships, and my self-understanding. Now I seek the true quiet that feeds my soul.

Speaking of the Ineffable

Susan Schoch, Idledale CO
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The subject is silence. Saying anything seems like a bit of a violation. What comes to mind is a small book, the gift of a friend, which stays open to the pages that instantly felt like truth to me. There are words and an image and I have looked at these two linked pages so many times that the picture and the quotation are bound together inside me, though they were never created with that intent.

The painter is given no credit for a quiet portrait of a village just coming awake. Sunrise colors a rising mist and points a pale glow over calm water; along the shore, tracks and docks and scars of use show only if you look closely. The land's history is softened by the remains of night, and by drifting chimney smoke from a few houses on the other side. Two women are at the water's edge; one is washing, one keeps watch. A man in black stands in front of a fence. These things are small beneath the tall trees, and the trees are small between the lake and the yellow sky. It feels like a story is beginning in the stillness.

Looking at it, I am sometimes returned to an inner knowing of that place. It is familiar, a settlement in the wild. Then there are the words.

I surround myself with silence. The silence is within me, permeates my house, reaches beyond the surfaces of the outer walls and into the bordering woods....In the silence I listen, I watch, I sense, I attend, I observe. I require this silence. I search it out. ~Alice Koller

Benedictine monks are taught to cultivate that inner quiet, in order that they can deeply listen. Silence contains the whole, before it splinters into words. Listening, life comes closer. Brother Andrew Marr wrote, "Silence softens the relentlessness of truth." It's a needed comfort. I pass the little book on its stand, waiting in stillness, and I'm reminded of my friend, and all the women who find saving possibilities in silence, where stories rise before us.

The Apartment

Lesa Phillips, Lockhart TX

I am sitting in my car, just looking at my brother's apartment.

I know I need to climb the stairs to the second story, but how can I enter the apartment? So many times in the past, I went in and out by myself without a second thought: to do his laundry, put away his groceries, or start his dinner. But it has all changed.

My mother expects me to enter his apartment to pick out a suit for his funeral.

Somehow I manage to climb the stairs. I am at the door. My hands are shaking as I fumble to put the key in the door.

Who knew a single key could weigh a hundred pounds? Dread envelops me as I slowly push the door open.

I can see my brother, sitting on the couch, laughing, talking to the football players on TV. It was just last weekend that my son Marcus and I fell asleep on the floor when we spent the night. I can still smell and taste the BBQ that my brother had grilled on the patio.

How can he be gone? He was killed by stupid teenagers in their gang initiation. They never even knew Bobby.

Now I am sitting here in a silent apartment, crying my heart away. I will never be able to hold him again.

The Day the Noises Stopped

Abby November, Austin TX
Judith Helburn Writing Circle, Austin TX

Newark in July is sultry, steamy, and smelly. I have been up here since the end of June. I'm staying with my cousin and visiting my elder sister. Recently diagnosed with ALS, she has declined rapidly. We sit beside the hospital bed. Her throat is filled with a plastic tube which muffles whatever sounds she tries to make. Noises from the heart, lung, oxygen, and various life supporting machines provide a background hum. She is aware that we are here as the tears rolling down her withered cheeks attest. Her weak hands, wired and tubed, feel like Jello without substance. ALS has decimated muscle, rendering it useless. Her once artist's hands now lack strength to hold a paintbrush. Last time we spoke on the phone, which was held by her daughter, she told me how much she missed me, what a good sister I am. (I disagreed.) My sister said, "I prayed to G-d to take me; I am ready. For this world is not the end, but a vestibule into a better world without pain."

As she lay there, we sang all manner of Yiddish songs. We were off key, but no one complained. We ran through our limited mental songbook, then sang, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. She may have been praying for a respite to our singing; who knows? She coded once. They brought back her atrophied body. Several hours later, she coded again and was brought back once more. We went to her, each touching an arm, held it, and said, "You can go now; we'll take care of your kinder." Her machines were running down and slowly quieting. After all the unnatural devices were removed, we sat, touching her still warm hands. Her face relaxed as if sleeping.

Rest in peace, beautiful sister. I hope the golden silence led you to the place of your prayers.

Thirteen Ways of Experiencing Silence

Lynn Goodwin, Danville CA
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Mute the TV
Stand in fresh-fallen snow silently blanketing the trees
Hear the child who refuses to speak
Watch students undertaking the LSATs, while a proctor paces the rows
Sit in your car with the windows rolled up
Be in a foreclosed home with nothing but moonlight for decoration
Peer into a classroom with bare bulletin boards in midsummer
Listen to the cactus on a sun-parched desert
Imagine solitary confinement or a padded cell
Visit a ghost town
Does a deaf person feel vibrations when she sees applause?
What do the ears hear during sleep?
Does the dust make a sound when it settles?

Silence is the absence of sound, like white space in a concrete poem.

The Still Small Voice

Patricia Roop Hollinger, Westminster MD
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We sit for an hour in silence at Quaker Meeting,
We then assemble for eating and greeting.

"Sitting in silence is worship?" folks ask;
"Oh yes, it's a time to reflect on what is my task."

The cacophony of 21st century noises,
Drowns out our still small voices.

For many years I never trusted their words;
Voices from the soul source were just viewed as absurd.

"Oh no, I trusted the voices of people in power,"
They spoke with authority from their ivory towers.

Those decisions I made; based on their wisdom;
"Well, let's just say they did not lead me to my kingdom."

They led to a divorce; the unpardonable sin;
But those voices, "they told me I would win."

Thus began my exploration of the "still small voice within."
Authority figures did not understand my grin.

For, I was led to my calling; although a tad late in my life;
"No, the journey was not without strife."

But it was my journey; listening to the voice
Only heard in the silence.

Writing My Truths

Madeline Sharples, Manhattan Beach CA
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I have a new room.
I write in there alone.
I sit at my draftsman table,
looking out the bay window
to the garden.
I see the trunks
of the three palm trees,
the small cement pond,
and the ferns swinging
their leaves behind it.
Sometimes a bird comes
by for a drink,
surfing along the top
of the pool.
Yet, I don't open the window
to hear its song.
I want to hear
the songs my son
once played before he died.
They are my muse.
His memory
lets my soul
listen to the words
in my head. It allows me
to put my fingers
on the keyboard
and write my truths
in silence.

Planting Time

Lavon Urbonas, Rancho Cucamonga CA

Much of their bonding over the last 29 years went on during mealtimes. Neither was comfortable with intimate conversations, but they discussed the mundane matters that can make or break a marriage. Those exchanges had changed during the past year. He had become profoundly deaf, and meaningful conversation had dwindled in direct proportion to his hearing loss. Now much of their time was spent in silence.

For weeks she had wanted to tell him about the lip reading classes at the Senior Center. She knew better than to tell him he *should* do something for his own good. She had learned that the seed needed to be planted so it would germinate into his idea. The planting time had to be right, though. For some reason she thought maybe this evening at the dinner table would be that time. She had brought the new activity schedule home from the Senior Center where she had been taking classes.

"I notice that there's a lip reading class at the Senior Center," she said.

There was a blank look—the look she had come to recognize as *I don't have a clue what you just said*.

Speaking directly to him, making eye contact, she repeated, "I notice that there is a lip reading class at the Senior Center."

He was trying to process her garble of words. "Uhhh...what?"

More deliberately now and a little louder she said, "There is a lip reading class at the Senior Center."

He caught a word. "What kind of class?"

She knew how it irritated him if she showed any hint of frustration when trying to make him understand. Without rolling her eyes she responded, "Lip reading."

He shook his head. "No, no, no, no! No lip reading class. That would be like giving up hope. I can't give up the hope that I'll get my hearing back." End of discussion.

Well, she thought, *at least the seed has been planted*. And a lonely silence enveloped them once again, broken only by the slurping of his soup, which only she could hear.

A Sacred Silence

Teresa Werth, Spencerport NY
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I was a volunteer caregiver in our local two-bed hospice for five years. A friend and I shared the Monday evening shift, a night of calm and respite for both of us. The house was always peaceful, quiet. Depending on where our residents were on their journey, we could have interesting conversation, hear life stories, counsel family members, or hold someone's hand as they slept a heavy, pain-free sleep.

I remember how surprised I was the first time I took a day shift. The house was filled with the hum of "worker bees," the chatter of families, and all the activities of daily living. It was then I knew I preferred the quiet of evenings.

We'd play soothing music. I'd ask what the resident liked or choose something restful. I'd light a candle and offer to read poetry, scripture, or something they chose. If they were asleep, I'd sit next to their bed holding their hand, stroking their hair, and telling them softly that it was all right to let go of their tired, worn out body. In the silence of caring for a stranger, my own busy world melted away.

I especially remember those few times when a resident's life ended on our watch. At first, I was afraid of how I might react but I was pleasantly surprised. We knew our resident's life was near the end. We called her husband but he had a distance to drive on a cold, snowy night. I sat next to her bed, holding her hand, watching the rise and fall of her chest with each breath, and in one sacred, silent moment, she slipped away. I continued to hold her hand and then laid it gently at her side.

Her husband arrived. I told him how sorry I was that he'd missed his chance to say good bye, but he said he was relieved that her suffering was over, that their life was complete in every way. We all stood around the bed holding hands. I said a prayer. The candle gave off a soft glow. We stood in sacred silence.

Alone in Prayer

Nancilynn Saylor, Austin TX
mimi10417@sbcglobal.net,
w-ecircles 3, 4, and 6

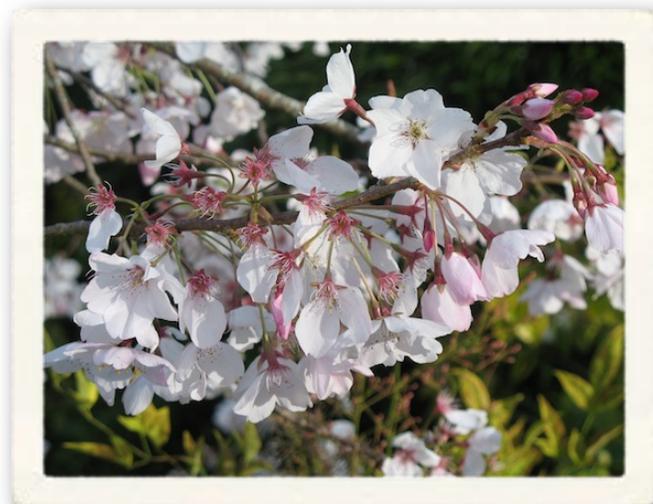
Candles glimmer
hot tears shimmer
Not a sound
Silence

Visions dying
hope denying
yet all around me...
silence

Pleas ascending
for hearts be mending;
but, in the heavens:
silence

At last, sleeping
Angels creeping
in the darkness and
silence

Light surrounds me
Spirits ground me
In pure love's swaddle...
silence.



Silence and Then...

Arlene Howard, Rancho Mirage CA
 arlenehoward630@gmail.com · w-ecircle 14

“Don't go.”

“Mom, we aren't talking.”

“Please don't hang up.” The silence continued.

This pattern of conversation lasted for over an hour. I can see myself sitting on my green-flowered comforter in Annapolis, Maryland, a black phone to my ear, my mom in a nursing home 3000 miles away in Fairfield, California. After about an hour of silence, “Mom, I am going to say good-bye now.” *Did she hear my words? I didn't hear hers. I didn't hear her words ever again.* It was Mother's Day 1996, the last Mother's Day I ever had with her, that we ever had together, though silent.

A month later, I saw her. Her eyes were closed. By this time she was in not talking at all. I didn't know what to say. “I love you Mom.” *Did she hear me?* I have to believe she did. When we left, my daughter and I walked for a long way trying to ease our pain. We didn't talk. We cried silently. Twenty-three hours later Mom died. Eighteen months previously she had fallen and was on the floor for two and half days all by herself. Finally she managed to crawl to the phone. My Mom, born before commercial airlines, transcontinental telephone service, home refrigerators and TVs, an independent hard-working energetic creative soul who at eighty-five still hung her wash out on her line, decided she didn't want to live any more.

Six years later, on a spring morning I awoke with a start. The sun was shining through the windows. Outside the fruit trees were beginning to blossom. Inside my Mom was in the room talking to me. I saw her kind face looking as she had when I was growing up. We started talking and have been talking ever since. I try to honor those things she told me that are important. I ask her for advice. I tell her what I am doing. “Mom the red bunting you made for your granddaughter is now keeping your great-granddaughter warm.” She laughs.

Silence no more.

Blessed Quiet

Samantha M. White, Nokomis FL
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 PeacePurposeAndJoy.blogspot.com

On my way to speak at a support group for people who have recently become deaf, I stop at the beach to think. The day is overcast, the shore deserted. Watching the surf slide in and out, I am enchanted, as always, by its rhythmic sound. A seagull calls as it circles above. All else is quiet.

This is the kind of silence I love, I think. Not really total silence, but blessed quiet, in which I can hear my thoughts.

When we speak of silence we don't usually mean no sound at all, but the absence of clamor that drowns out the lovely, more subtle sound: the rustle of tree branches, the clicking of bamboo wind chimes, the singing of sand beneath our feet as we walk, raindrops striking leaves and bouncing off pavement.

This is what they have lost, I realize. If—when—I lose my hearing, how I shall miss the sounds I love! Music, murmured conversation, rumbling thunder, hissing snowflakes falling, a droning propeller plane high above, clacking of a manual lawn mower.

At the support group meeting we speak of isolation, loss, and grief. They weep, they thank me, and invite me back. I feel grateful for my ability to help, and for my good fortune at still being able to hear.

It is my love of restful sounds that sends me in search of stillness, in a day at the beach, a walk in the woods, or a long sit on the porch, where I can hear my thoughts against the backdrop of gentle sounds. Sometimes, when the silence is almost complete, I can hear my breath and the ringing in my ears, the possible harbinger of my own hearing loss. I become aware of my heartbeat, the tense places in my body, and my emotions. I consciously relax the places that hold tension, and melt into the supreme quietude. That is when I hear most clearly the voice without sound, that spark of divinity which is simply the love at my core.

I am at peace.

Silent Words

Darlene Hayman, Montrose CO
 dhayman2010@gmail.com

Silence and stillness of mountains
 receiving white whippets of snow,
 scenes worthy of worship.

Soundless snow sprawling, like falling
 quietness of white soft feathers,
 like things thought and unsaid.

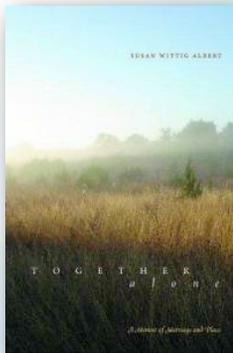
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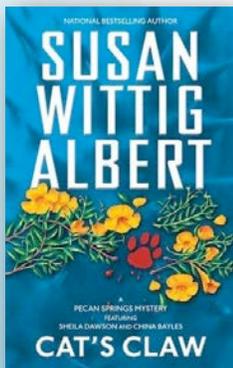
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 ~Library Journal~

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Words in Place: Reconnecting to Nature Through Creative Writing

(March 18-April 8, 2013)

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Sampling of Contemporary Women Poets as Model Poets: Part 3

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Members In Print & The News

December

These SCN members published blog posts this month on our One Woman's Day blog:

- Patricia Roop Hollinger
- Sherry Wachter

These SCN members published book reviews &/or interviews this month at Story Circle Book Reviews:

- Khadijah A.
- Judy Alter
- Laura Strathman Hulka
- Sharon Lippincott
- Olga Livshin
- Diana Nolan
- Edith O'Nuallain
- Sharon Wildwind

January

These SCN members published blog posts this month on our One Woman's Day blog:

- Patricia Roop Hollinger
- Tania Pryputniewicz
- Lisa Rizzo
- Laurinda Wheeler

These SCN members published book reviews &/or interviews this month at **Story Circle Book Reviews**:

- Khadijah A.
- Mary Jo Doig
- Laura Strathman Hulka
- Olga Livshin
- Mary Ann Moore
- Trilla Pando
- Susan Schoch

Pat LaPointe was recently interviewed by Jan Marquart regarding her recent publication, *The Woman I've Become: 37 Women Share Their Journeys From Toxic Relationships To Self Empowerment*. The interview can be found on Jan's blog.

Shelley Thrasher, one the SCN editors, has just had her first historical novel, *The Storm*, published by BoldStrokesBooks.

Dana Reynolds' new book, *Ink and Honey*, was recently published. It is the story of a sacred journey through the medieval French countryside with the sisters of Belle Coeur, a community of radically independent healers, visionaries, mystics and artisans who live by their wits and their prayers.

February

These SCN members published blog posts this month on our One Woman's Day blog:

- Pat Bean
- Janice Coffing
- Margaret Stephenson
- Carol Ziel

These SCN members published book reviews &/or interviews this month at Story Circle Book Reviews:

- Khadijah A.
- Judy Alter
- Lynn Goodwin
- Laura Strathman Hulka
- Penny Leisch
- Donna Russell
- Susan J. Tweit

Nan Phifer is facilitating "Spontaneous, Compelling Memoirs for Life-Review," a demonstration workshop for the American Society on Aging Conference at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, 151 Wacker Dr, Chicago IL, on March 15.

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Future Topics and deadlines for upcoming Journals:

- June, 2013 (due April 15)—Hidden Treasures
- September, 2013 (due July 15)—Storms
- December, 2013 (due Oct 15)—A Winter Gift
- March, 2014 (due Jan 15)—Action

Membership Dues Increase

Details on page 5

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