



STORY CIRCLE JOURNAL

Vol. 18 No.3, September 2014

The newsletter for women with stories to tell

Congratulations to the Winners of the 2014 Susan Wittig Albert Life Writing Competition

By Jude Whelley

SCN is proud to announce the winners of our Fifteenth Annual Susan Wittig Albert Life Writing Competition! The judges were faced with a major challenge as they sorted through 29 entries on the topic "balance" suggested by our SCN President, Jude Whelley. The judges chose winners for their freshness and originality, and the clarity and authenticity of the author's voice

The first place winner for 2014 is **Sara Etgen-Baker** of Anna, TX for her story "Flying Sand and Swirling Dust." Second prize goes to **Lois Ann Bull** of Easton, CT for "Keep Your Seat." **Brenda Black** of Prairie Grove, AR took third place for "Balancing Buzzards" with fourth place held by **Lois Halley** of Westminster, MD for "Henny Penny." The winners received cash prizes and their pieces appear both in this journal starting on page 3, and on the website at: www.storycircle.org/Contests/1406.shtml

The contest would not have been possible without the many hours of reading and reflection by our 21 wonderful volunteer judges. Thanks to all of you and to our co-chair, Peggy Moody, for her terrific organizational skills and web wonder-working. Thanks also to all the participants for your wonderful stories and the hard work you put in to writing them down. I encourage all of you to keep writing and to consider entering again next year.

If you did not enter the contest this year, I encourage you to explore this topic of "balance" in your own writing. It is an especially rich and rewarding one. And do consider entering the contest next summer. Win or lose you'll have a honed piece of writing you can be proud of. Let the stories of this year's winners move you—read them starting on page 3.

An SCN LifeWriting Retreat at Festival Hill: LifeLines with Linda Hasselstrom

Linda M. Hasselstrom returns to Texas to lead us in a Story Circle LifeWriting Retreat! Mark your calendars for May 14-17, 2015, and join us at the beautiful Festival Hill campus for this productive and inspiring event. Read the story on page 24, and visit the website at:

<http://www.storycircle.org/LifeLines/>

Sarton Memoir Award Honoring Women's Lives



Sarton Memoir Award

SCN's Sarton Memoir Award is named in honor of May Sarton, remembered for her work as a memoirist, novelist, and poet.

The award is given annually to the author of the best woman's memoir published in the US and Canada, selected from works submitted. The award is limited to submissions from small/independent publishers, university presses, and author-publishers (self-publishing authors). Professional librarians not affiliated with SCN will select the winner.

We are accepting submissions now through November 15, 2014. For details visit:

<http://www.storycircle.org/SartonMemoirAward/guidelines.php>

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Letter From SCN's President—



Dear SCN Sisters,

What amazing submissions we had for the 2014 Susan Wittig Albert Lifewriting Contest! I want to thank the writers and the two rounds of judges whose creativity, talent, and dedication made the competition a triumph. I know you will enjoy reading the winning essays. In truth, every essay was a win as it meant one woman writer sat down with her pen or computer and a story she wanted to tell. She not only finished and edited that story but also had the courage to submit it to the competition, putting her heart and words into the world. Kudos all around!

A few words about judging, SCN offers multiple opportunities to get your writing into print but also offers opportunities to evaluate writing. We do this informally in the writing circles. You can learn to evaluate essays and memoirs by volunteering to be a judge for the Lifewriting Competition or the Sarton Memoir Award. If you are writing a memoir, I strongly suggest you look at the Sarton evaluation rubric and use it to inform and improve your book. You can also take a turn at evaluating books by, for, and about women by becoming a reviewer for Story Circle Book Reviews.

Mark your calendars for May 15-17, 2015; plan to come to Texas and spend a weekend writing with Linda Hasselstrom. Linda was the keynote speaker and offered a workshop session at the April Stories from the Heart conference, both with rave reviews. You can find more information about her LifeLines Conference on page 24.

Summer is waning, days are growing shorter, it is time to settle down with a mug of warm cider or a pumpkin latte and get our stories onto the page and into the world.

Write on!

Jude



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

Flying Sand and Swirling Dust

by Sara Etgen-Baker of Anna TX

I glanced in the side view mirror of the U-Haul truck. One mile forward, one more, and then another. With each mile forward everything familiar slipped further and further away. Lush, tree-covered green hills slowly gave way to parched, bland land covered in sage brush and low-lying mesquite trees. By late afternoon, absolutely nothing was in front of me except miles of dry, hot Chihuahan Desert. Flat was the land—yellow, ochre, and brown.

By dusk a gnawing wind stirred across the desert uprooting tumbleweeds and forming a huge wall of dust. "Driving through this wind and dust is impossible!" My husband gripped the steering wheel. "Let's stop for dinner."

So, we exited the interstate and stopped at Chuy's—an old trailer converted to a diner. Once inside, I heard the sand patter like rain against the trailer's metal walls and brush across the windowpanes. Silt accumulated beneath the door and on the window ledges. I breathed in and choked. The desert, like my resentment, tasted bitter and brown.

I looked outside; the only thing visible between the diner and the interstate was a battered barrel cactus, a couple of yucca plants, some cinder block houses, and a ramshackle motel aptly named The Desert View Motel. Eighteen-wheelers roared down the interstate leaving clouds of dust in the dry desert air. The hot wind carried the dust across the parking lot of the diner and deeper into town where all the dirt roads seemed to lead nowhere in particular.

"You're not from around here are you?" The waitress handed me a menu.

"No, I'm not." I smiled politely.

"Never seen a haboob, have you?"

"A what?"

"A haboob—it's that huge wall of flying sand and swirling dust you've been driving through."

"No, I've never seen one." I glanced out the window. "So, what causes a haboob?"

"Locals say a haboob happens when the desert is angry with itself. When the anger persists, heat grows fueling the winds that stir up the dust. Eventually, though, cool winds replace the hot air and bring the desert back into balance."

"Sounds like a myth to me." I wiped the dust off my hands and opened the menu. "All I know is that I feel gritty and dirty."

"Then you'll be needin' a warm shower and clean bed. You can get a 30 percent discount over at the Desert View Motel. When you check in, just show Carlos your dinner receipt. He'll fix you right up."

"Um, I don't know." I cleared my throat and glanced at my husband. "Isn't there a LaQuinta or Holiday Inn nearby?"

"Nope. The closest hotel is 20 miles down the

interstate. Trust me. It's not safe to drive down the interstate during a haboob."

So after dinner, we heeded our waitress' advice and checked into the Desert View Motel. Although our room was cramped, it was clean—clean that is until we turned on the air conditioner. Trapped sand inside the air conditioner flew across the room; and a layer of the grit landed all over our sheets and pillowcases. The sandy sheets irritated me and stirred up my thoughts and emotions. Unable to sleep, I laid awake and stared at the ceiling as so many unanswerable questions just swirled through my mind.

What's wrong with me? Why am I so angry? After all, my husband's not to blame for being laid off. But he hadn't been able to find a job in Dallas—forcing us to relocate. Is moving to El Paso the right decision? Sure he wants to teach math and coach cross country, but is this barren god-forsaken desert the right place? I want him to be fulfilled, but what about me? Am I being selfish? Is leaving behind my family, friends, and dream job a mistake? Is it even possible to thrive in this dusty, parched land? And what about my willingness to embrace something new? Where's my spirit of adventure! Get a grip!

I woke early the next morning—the sun casting a warm glow across the room. I peeked out the window; the sky was now abundantly clear. The sun glistened across the sand and beckoned me outside. So, I slipped into my running clothes and jogged across the motel parking lot and onto the sandy land in front of me. As I ran through the desert, my feet sank in the soft, cushiony deep sand. My ankles felt weak, and I teetered from side to side unable to keep my balance, eventually falling face forward in the gritty sand.

"Damn you, desert! I hate you!" I spit out my resentment—tasting the bitter, ochre-colored sand on my tongue. I looked up and saw a cactus with one lone, yellow flower. How can anything bloom here? Something rustled behind me. I turned around and sat up. A short distance from me a roadrunner dashed across the desert. Other than in cartoons, I'd never seen a roadrunner. How amazing!

"Miss! Are you alright?" asked a genial voice behind me; I turned back around. A brown-faced teenage boy stared down at me and smiled. "Here. Let me give you a hand up." He pulled me up, and I dusted the sand off my legs and arms. "If you're gonna run in the desert, pick up your feet; otherwise you'll continue to lose your balance and fall."

"Thanks for the tip."

"You might want to get different running shoes—ones that balance your body and support your ankles. By the way, my name's Miguel."

"Nice to meet you Miguel."

"I run pretty fast." He restarted his stop watch. "You can follow me if you like."

With that, Miguel sprang forward on his toes and

sprinted across the desert; and for a short while, I followed Miguel's graceful, brown form mimicking his style as he ran through the open desert. Eventually, I lost sight of Miguel but continued running alone until I found a place to turn around. I stopped momentarily; and there in the barren stillness, a space opened up inside me that hadn't been accessible for weeks. When I touched upon it, I pressed upon a tender spot—a bruise, a discomfort that was both welcome and oddly necessary. I inhaled and filled my lungs then exhaled. Cool winds of acceptance brushed across my face, and some of my resentment, anger, and tightness diminished. I felt lighter—a bit more balanced somehow.

About the author:

Sara Etgen-Baker's love for words began when, as a young girl, her mother read the dictionary to her every night. A teacher's unexpected whisper, "You've got writing talent," ignited her writing desire.

Her manuscripts have won several contests and have been published in numerous anthologies including *Times They Were A Changing: Women Remember the 60s & 70s*. Others have appeared in SCN's True Words Anthology, Looking Back Magazine, Guideposts, Halcyon, Page & Spine, and The Storyteller.

Sara enjoys her participation with the Story Circle Network, the National Association of Memoir Writers, and the National League of American Pen Women, Dallas Branch.

Keep Your Seat

by Lois Ann Bull of Easton CT

By the age of ten my daughter had a white pony and learned how to jump fences. It took a few "flying dismounts," when her bottom and ego suffered some bruising, but determination won out and soon she sailed over them with ease. The rider's posture and position in the saddle are all-important during that heady moment when the horse's four feet are airborne, and she'd lift up and over as if on Pegasus, the flying horse of mythology.

It looked so easy I wanted to do it too: to be free for a minute from cooking, cleaning, chauffeuring. I wanted a moment to leave reality. Skydiving and hang gliding smacked of Icarus and death in the sea, which didn't interest me, but Pegasus's legendary leap into the heavens did, so long as I didn't fall off.

What few riding lessons I'd had gave me the confidence to think that the four horse speeds and other essential terms, like giddy-yap and whoa, were all I needed to know in order to complete a jump. The fact that tennis muscles and equestrian muscles might be different never entered my head. Therefore, the day I scheduled a private jumping lesson, I managed to reaffirm my amateur standing around horses.

I dressed in the only jeans I owned, a tight designer style that achieved great popularity in the late seventies. They required me to suck in my belly and use pliers to tug up the zipper. To protect my Calvin's, I wore riding chaps borrowed from a friend. "The suede," she said, "will cause more friction with the saddle. It'll be easier to 'keep your seat.'"

Her encouragement boosted my enthusiasm. The pale pink chaps had a marvelous fringed edge that cascaded from waist to toe. They delighted the I-feel-pretty, ruffle, and bow me. Lacking proper footwear, I wore fake-cordovan cowboy boots and thought I looked ready for the rotogravure.

As I write this I reflect upon that day and the subsequent years I lived and worked in the Chihuahuan Desert. I frequently ran across the open desert; and with each advancing footfall, I became a bit stronger and learned how to balance myself. With each advancing day, I released a bit of my resentment and learned how to balance my feelings. Releasing my resentment lessened its dominion over me. In so doing, I discovered that my resentment was like a haboob—a giant wall of swirling emotions fueled by fear, disappointment, injustice, and anger. Like the haboob's churning dust, my resentment initially obscured my vision, created imbalance, and made it impossible to see the beauty and possibilities right in front of me.

When my daughter and I arrived at the stable, my blond hair combed and sprayed, and eyeliner perfectly drawn, the instructor didn't echo what my daughter had said with horror, "You're going to wear that?" The teacher graciously welcomed me, a paying customer, and overlooked the attire. Handing me a hard hat, she offered a leg up on what I hoped was a gently schooled horse. Unfortunately, it wasn't white like Abbie's pony nor did it have wings.

Once in the riding ring, I had to show what I knew, so I concentrated hard on keeping my balance, heels down in the stirrups, back straight, while projecting an attitude of confidence. When the instructor asked me to post to the horse's trot, I pressed hard with my inner thigh muscles to stay astride. Halfway around the ring, my muscles burned out and my heels came up. My upper body shot from sitting to 'standing in the stirrups' at every clip-clop. From the waist down, I felt like gruel.

"Can you canter?" the instructor asked.

"Yes." I had cantered once or twice on trail rides, so I guessed I knew how. Swallowing hard, I began to sweat. I had paid for this lesson, so mushy muscles or not, I wanted my money's worth, and I wanted to fly. Pegasus, here I come.

First she explained the pointers and had me walk through the routine. Then with a quick nod of her head, she said, "When you're ready, go ahead."

Wanting not to fall, I prepared myself by assuming my own fear and self-preservation position. Trying to look casual and self-assured, I grabbed a huge wad of the horse's mane with my left hand and managed to also grip the meager English saddle, (no big western horn here). My right hand clutched the two English-style reins along with another huge hunk of mane. Please, instructor, don't notice

these 'lifesaving tactics.' At this point, however, losing my balance, falling off, or breaking a bone worried me more than appearing an accomplished equestrian. If she rolled her eyes at my form, I missed it.

I urged the horse to get going. We careened around the ring in a blur. Then he stopped short, right by the gate to the barn. The whiplash stop made me sure I would eat dirt! But my tenacious clutching kept me in place. With the sun setting in the west he knew it was chow time and he wanted me, the clueless rider on his back, to be informed. Pulling the reins, I swung his head away from the gate and saw our ringmaster adjusting the jumping fence. At last, my time had come.

Thrill and dread coursed through me like alternating current as I faced my first fence. My brown Pegasus cantered toward the jump and I prepared. I concentrated. I aimed. I squeezed my leg muscles for balance, but they didn't react nor would my heels go down. The horse, however, knew the routine and jumped the fence at the correct spot. I went with him—and then some. My bottom came out of the saddle on a projected path over his head. Terrified, my grip tightened on those wads of mane.

White knuckled, I held fast as the rest of my body contorted. My bum rose. My arms wrenched forward. A whoosh of air sped under me. And I landed, not on the ground, but north of the saddle on the poor beast's withers (shoulders) but balanced.

Instinctively, I locked my ankles around his neck. The horse, uncertain what menace pressed down on him, shot across the ring toward the gate, wanting the safety of the

About the author:

Lois Ann Bull discovered writing when turning 50. After a BA in Psychology and MA in Education she raised two children. Once the nest emptied, she began writing her anecdotal memories: book one covered her early years; book two, raising her children; book three, those difficult years, 16-24.

Lois lives in Connecticut with her husband, Bob, plus a black lab and a rescued siamese. When not writing, they enjoy photography, and travel. In fact, because her cultural curiosity was stimulated as an AFS Exchange Student-'57, Lois tallies six continents and forty-three countries visited over her lifetime.

Balancing Buzzards

by Brenda Black of Prairie Grove AR

I've never cared for turkey buzzards. I cringe and look away when I pass by them on the highway, munching on roadkill, their naked red heads exposed to the world. My husband says the consummate scavengers have a job to do and should be respected for doing it.

"But why do they have to be so repulsively ugly?" I often ask him.

After living in a valley for most of our lives, we moved to a mountaintop aerie that put us near the clouds above the forest. A magnificent flock of large birds make their home on our mountain. In early morning they fly together in loose formation, east to west as the sun makes its way across, then circle and pass again. They seldom flap their wings, but stay aloft by riding wind currents. Mostly they glide, seeming to float on the wind. Then suddenly the glorious

barn. The world spun with the first jolt. My body flipped 180 degrees. Only my tightened ankles and death grip on the mane kept me, so to speak, in contact with him. By the time he stopped, I hung beneath his head like a circus clown, delighted to still be with the horse—well, more or less—and not on the ground.

My daughter, standing like a vigilant mother at the rail, looked terrified. Her eyes met mine and I flashed her a big grin. The upside down nature of my predicament tickled my funny bone, and giggles bubbled up—then laughter. Infected, she too started to laugh till tears ran down her cheeks. I'd done it. I'd flown. I'd neglected standard procedure, but I hadn't fallen off.

The fact that I might have hurt myself barely registered until I noticed the instructor's horrified expression. As she untangled my fingers from the mane and helped me right myself, she said, in a voice full of disapproval, "You do realize you could've been killed?"

"But I didn't fall off," I shot back gaily, still very proud of myself.

"You should have; it would have been safer. We need to teach you how to fall."

"I don't think so." Falling off didn't fit with my image of sailing off to Never-Never-Land on a great white steed. Not meeting her eyes, I removed the hard hat, fluffed my hair, and tugged down my lovely pink chaps.

"Thanks," I said, "but not today." Pulling together what little decorum I could salvage, I sauntered to the car trying hard to suppress my huge grin.

raptors stretch their wings upward into a V and soar across the sky at breakneck speeds. I love to watch their aerial acrobatics.

"What are those graceful birds?" I asked my husband when we first observed them.

"Turkey buzzards! The ones you hate," he gleefully replied.

I didn't believe him, but after consulting Google and catching a glint of a red head now and then, I knew he was right. I started to think about opposite traits and compensation. Did the universe make the turkey buzzard ugly to compensate for its majestic flying skills? Or give the vulture gracious flight to make up for its hideous physique and disgusting work detail?

Does the beautiful balance the ugly? Is it enough?

I own a garden center. I'm no beauty digging in the dirt, sweat pouring down my face in a hot greenhouse. No one wants to look real close at me doing my job either. But there are deeper deficits than how I look. The universe gave me asthma, plant allergies and other thorns, then plopped me in a greenhouse to do my life's work. My stamina and physical prowess is lacking. But that weakness is balanced with a curious, strong mind and can-do attitude. I am a graceful bird in flight as numbers fly off the pristine page when I balance the nursery's books. Working in my HEPA-filtered air-conditioned wheelhouse, my tenacious mind stays focused as I efficiently dispatch all those pieces of paper.

Likewise, my writing requires long hours of sitting, using my brain to weave words into stories. Creating is addictive, like a drug. It steals my sleep, my cleaning time, my cooking time, my family time, and eventually my health. Suddenly, I realize how much I look like that ugly turkey buzzard -- sitting at the keyboard in three-day-old red pajamas, hunched over, cross-eyed, plucking at words.

About the author:

Brenda Black writes memoir in the Arkansas Ozarks. Her fun-loving husband is good fodder and often populates her stories. Active in numerous writing organizations and critique groups, Brenda attends way too many conferences, often serving as officer, presenter or contest judge. Her stories have appeared in anthologies, garden magazines and journals, and have been read on NPR's *Tales From the South*. Her book *Black and Kiddo*, a memoir of her in-laws, is finally nearing completion.

Henny Penny

by Lois Halley of Westminster MD

When I was five years old, I was given four dyed baby chicks for Easter. There is an inherent cruelty in giving live baby birds as Easter toys, but I was blissfully unaware of that. Besides, my mother supervised the care and handling of them so closely, you would think she was the mother hen.

The babies were kept in a large cardboard box in the kitchen, and to me their peeping calls were the sweetest sounds on earth.

Despite our best efforts, first a blue, then the two pinks died, leaving one blue who grew into a beautiful reddish brown young rooster. He had a deep red comb on the top of his head and interesting red protuberances under his neck that I learned were wattles. Knowing the story of *Chicken Little* from "The Sky is Falling," I remembered the name Henny Penny, so that is what I dubbed my little bird.

Having outgrown the cardboard box, the outdoors became his domain. In a small town where children, cats, and dogs spilled into each other's yards without thought of boundaries, my young rooster became the king of the block. Henny strutted around, head held high, or pecked the ground for insects. His gentle baby call of "peep, peep," turned into a raucous "COCK-A-DOODLE-DO," which fascinated me but not so much the neighbors. They were not fond of being awakened at dawn.

My task is to balance myself again, to keep my strong mind from ignoring my weak body. My body needs to move. Physical movement grounds me, reminds my churning mind that I belong to the earth. I need to touch it and feel it, to find my place among its critters. I can't live in my head. I need the balance of my body in order to soar.

In the evenings on my mountaintop, the turkey buzzards appear in the sky again. They aren't in formation at this time of day. They aren't searching for prey. They come to play. The changing thermals of the setting sun beckon them. They glide on the wind wherever it takes them, sometimes spiraling with updrafts until they shrink into small dots. They chase each other, they dive-bomb, they float. My husband has named some of them-- GotchWing, Streak, FF (for Frittered Feathers).

If I'm still sitting at my keyboard in my writing room at the back of the house, I can't see them. But they call me out anyway. Outside my window, their enormous shadows pass through the trees, Hitchcock-style, telling me it's time for a brain-break, time to balance work with play.

I hit "Save" and join my husband on the deck.

There was a small dog tied to a dog house nearby, and the two formed an unlikely friendship. Scorning the crude shelter my dad built for him, Henny preferred instead to sleep with the dog in his dog house. When the dog was fed, he allowed Henny to share his bowl with him.

It was an auspicious occasion when the priest came to call. Aunt Agnes, who lived in the other half of our double home, prepared for such a visit by cleaning thoroughly from top to bottom. She finished by putting fresh doilies on the living room furniture just as the front doorbell rang. She greeted the priest, and after a few preliminaries invited him into the living room. There on the sofa sat Henny Penny! To make matters worse, when she picked him up to evict him, he pecked her hands and pooped! It was a month before she overcame her embarrassment and went to church again.

Henny developed the annoying habit of chasing children and pecking their heels. My parents began getting complaints. I began to hear things like, "He's a nuisance. It's time," but I didn't comprehend.

My mother grew up in a household of lots of kids, dogs, canaries, and a parrot. In the barn they kept a horse, a cow for milk, and chickens for eggs and meat. My dad lived and worked on a farm from when he was twelve until eighteen. The chickens and roosters were entirely different to them than my Henny, the first pet I remember loving, was to me.

One day, I saw my father sharpening an ax. "What's that for?" I asked. He hesitated before answering, "Oh, I have some wood to chop." An icy cold hand seemed to grip my heart. I ran into the house and stood at the screen door, looking out with my mother. My dad picked Henny up by his feet and carried him to a tree stump while poor Henny screamed and squawked at the indignity.

My dad looked over his shoulder and shouted to my mom, "Don't let her see this!" But my mom responded, "She won't understand," and see "it" I did. I believe I saw the headless body run a few steps, and I think I saw the beautiful head on the ground, beak open and sightless eyes staring upward, but that might be in my imagination.

Sixty-one years later, I still try to balance the good people that my parents were with this single act of brutality. We didn't have much money, and a roasted chicken would have provided at least a couple meals for us. I was spared seeing Henny's lovely rusty feathers plucked from his body, but I knew who it was when my mother removed him from the oven. I pretended to have a tummy ache and was excused to my room. I didn't cry or yell or protest, but I went into a kind of daze for a few weeks. They never talked to me about the incident.

About the author:

Lois Halley 's first published article was in her school magazine when she was twelve years old. The writing bug was put on hold while she went to nursing school and later pursued a BS in psychology and sociology, and a masters degree in business. Somewhere along the line Lois got married and acquired a lot of pets. After retiring seven years ago, she could return to her love of writing and has been published in many magazine and newsletters.



*"Every leaf speaks bliss to me,
Fluttering from the autumn tree."*

—Emily Bronte



We Have a New Address!

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It turned out that they could not eat him, either. When all was said and done, he had died a terrible death for nothing. The entire roast was dumped into the garbage. I absolutely know that children have suffered far worse traumas, and I tell myself to get over it, suck it up. It's the norm that countless chickens are killed for food every day. It's no wonder that as an adult I became a vegetarian, and chicken was the first flesh food I gave up.

This "incident" crops up to haunt me periodically, and I ponder the purpose of it in my life. How could my loving parents be so insensitive to their child's feelings? Perhaps they just didn't know.

I wonder if my decision to become a nurse and alleviate pain in others came from wanting to put Henny back together again. Does my love of animals and insatiable desire to help them stem from not wanting to see another living being mistreated? I still try to answer these and other questions, but in the balance of my life, despite some questions that have no answers, the good far outweighs the bad.

Billie Ortiz Presents ...

Waking the Dreamer Within Festival

October 16-19, 2014

*An inspirational weekend
celebrating the language
of metaphor through...*

- *Dreams, Dance, & Art*
- *Creative Writing & Poetry*
- *Music & Drumming*

WakingtheDreamerWithin.org



Listen to Your Mother

An Interview with

Judy Miller

by Pat Bean

Judy M. Miller (Zionsville, IN), MA, CGE is the author of the internationally selling *What To Expect From Your Adopted Tween* and creator and teacher of the class "Twins, Teens & Beyond."

Judy is a frequent radio guest, conference speaker and workshop facilitator. She has penned tens of dozens of articles and essays that grace adoption and parenting magazines and anthologies, among them, *A Cup of Comfort for Adoptive Families*, *Pieces of Me: Who Do I Want to Be?*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Thanks Mom*, *Sensational Journeys*, and *Women Writing on Family*. Judy serves an Editor for Story Circle Book Reviews. She believes that writing and storytelling is powerful, giving voice to and connecting who we are. Judy will,

for the second year in a row, direct and produce Listen To Your Mother, a live storytelling event, in Indianapolis in May, 2014.

Judy Miller is a mother and a writer – two attributes that qualified her to participate in a national program called “Listen to your Mother,” in which moms read their stories to an audience.

Judy, who is Story Circle Network’s vice president, jumped at the opportunity to do just that after hearing about the program from a friend, who was producing and directing one of the regional shows.

“When I heard the premise, I couldn’t submit my piece, ‘Souls Speak,’ quickly enough,” said Judy, who is the mother of four children, and writes regularly about motherhood and parenting. She auditioned for the 2012 Northwest Indiana show, and was “over the moon” when she was selected.

“I was totally blown away by the range of stories in the Indiana show,” said Judy. As soon as it was over, she applied to direct and produce a Listen to Your Mother program in Indianapolis for 2013.

She was thrilled to get a green go-ahead light, but admitted that her husband was not as happy. He was “furious with me,” she says, “because of all the time and work he knew such a project would demand. But he softened after a few months, after noticing how happy I was.”

So it was that Judy also directed and produced the 2014 Indianapolis show.

The piece she read for the show was titled “Between Us,” which is a tribute to her adopted daughter and to the woman who chose to give up her child so she would have a good life. The story (which you can listen to at <http://tinyurl.com/or48zvq>) had Judy reaching for a tissue.

“I am blessed,” she said, “to parent a multiracial, blended family of biological and adopted kiddos...I began writing to make sense of raising a child with sensory processing disorder, and then to process other events in my life, such as the arrivals of my kids and the legacy of my mother.”

Judy, the only girl of four children, considers herself a Chicago girl, although she was raised in what she calls “an idyllic rural setting outside of the Windy City by a mother who believed that childhood should be enjoyed.” Her education includes Master of Arts degrees in anthropology and forensics.

“I was bitten by the anthro bug in Mr. Cummings’s sixth-grade history class. Exploring why we do what we do has always fascinated me. I love to explore, learn, and travel. All of these curiosities continue to drive me.”

Judy is also driven by her motherhood responsibilities. While they are many, she believes that probably the most important one is to “listen with a mother’s heart. Intuition drives my decisions and listening with my mother’s heart guides me pretty accurately through the challenges of raising four kids.”

As a writer whose focus is on family, the Listen to You Mother program was a perfect vehicle for Judy’s writing. The program, she says, takes an audience “on a well-crafted journey about motherhood, and even those who are not mothers will find stories that they can appreciate, or stories that resonate with them.”

LYM was created by Ann Imig in Wisconsin in 2011. It was an immediate success and four more shows were produced that year. Ten shows were performed in 2012, 24 in 2013, and 32 this year, all within a period of two weeks prior to Mother’s Day. Each show is completely different, based on the stories of the regional presenters.

“I love it when people come up to me after the show and say such things as: “How did you know? You spoke my words.” Or, “Oh, my god. This was amazing.” Or, “How can I present my story?”

Stories that are selected to be read are judged on content, how they transfer from the page to the stage, and how they will fit with the other stories that are chosen.

While being in charge of one of the regional shows involves a lot of hard work, Judy said the rewards have been many.

"I have gained so much. Confidence. Perspective. Strength in commitment. Ability to inspire others. A sure voice. Ease of authentically connecting with others. I'm growing in ways I never thought I could, soliciting financial support from sponsors directing other writers, producing an amazing show that connects with so many, creating a legacy example of 'Yes, I can!' for my kids – most importantly for my daughters. I am inspired by the mosaic of motherhood, and honored to give back to others and to my community."

If you're thinking that all these stories sounds like a book in the making, you're right. Judy said that one will be coming out in 2015. And, if like Judy, you're inspired to participate in the 2015 LYTM program, you can find all the details at <http://tinyurl.com/lqowmlo>



Pat Bean is a writer, avid birder, hiker and passionate nature observer with wanderlust in her soul who spent nine years living and traveling in a small RV, most of that time with an opinionated black cocker spaniel named Maggie by her side. She now lives in a small apartment in Tucson with Pepper, a joyful black Scottie mix.

Pat is currently putting the finishing touches on a book she has titled, *Travels With Maggie*. She feels it would fit nicely on any book shelf, or on a Kindle, right next to Steinbeck's *Travels With Charlie*. At least that's her dream. Since beginning their travels in the rolling home they call Gypsy Lee, she and Maggie traveled over 130,000 miles together. She and Pepper have done 7,000 miles together and look forward to more.

Follow Pat on her blog at: <http://patbean.wordpress.com>

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- Tell It Slant: Using Creative Nonfiction Strategies for Writing About Painful Experiences. September 22-November 3, 2014
- Me, My World, and the Way It Was: Writing Memoir. September 15-November 10, 2014
- We Speak Their Names: A Memoir Workshop. September 22-October 20, 2014

Journaling & Self-Discovery

- Write Your Art Out: An Introduction to Creative Journaling. September 22-November 3, 2014
- How to Be Your Own Writing Coach: Practical Journaling for Productive Writing. October 13-November 10, 2014
- Mindfulness & Writing: Discover Your Authentic Voice. September 15-October 20, 2014

Sharpening Skills

- Unearthing & Polishing Your Gems. September 15-October 20, 2014
- An Experiment: Writing 20 Minutes a Day for 1 Month. October 13-November 10, 2014
- Finish the Damn Thing! How To Craft A Satisfying Ending For Your Story. September 15-October 20, 2014

Networking, Publishing & Blogging

- You Can Sell Your Book. September 15-October 13, 2014
- Beginning Blogging. September 15-October 27, 2014

Poetry

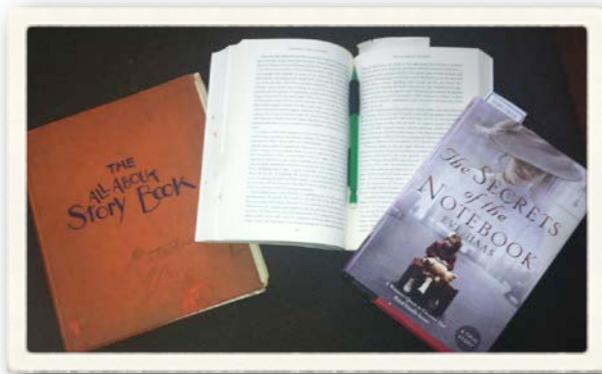
- Sacred, Gratitude & Thanksgiving Poems. September 15-November 10, 2014
- Poetry for the Truly Terrified. October 6-November 10, 2014
- Women Poets, Writing Women's Lives. September 15-November 10, 2014

Independent Study Program

- Session 1: September 15-October 13, 2014: Lynn Goodwin
- Session 2: October 13-November 10, 2014: Lynn Goodwin

Winter 2015

Our next class schedule will be posted in mid-November. Classes will run January 12-March 09, 2015.



SCN's Book Reviews

The Women Behind Story Circle Book Reviews

by Susan Wittig Albert

One of SCN's most widely-recognized projects is its book review site. Now in its fourteenth year, StoryCircleBookReviews.org is the largest and most comprehensive women's book review site on the Internet. With nearly 1700 reviews and a team of forty-plus reviewers, SCBR provides a respected review venue for small presses, university and regional presses, and for women authors whose books may not be reviewed elsewhere. If you're looking for strong, insightful, well-written books by women of strength and courage, you'll find them here.



So who's behind all this great work? Our stellar team of multi-talented crackerjack editors, that's who! Let's meet them.

Ever since she learned to read, **Barbara Heming** has been a voracious reader. For her a snow day was a gift of time to journey into the worlds sandwiched between the covers of a book. She pursued a Ph.D. in Hispanic Languages and Literature which opened doors into literature of other cultures. After moving to a remote canyon in northern New Mexico a few years ago, she turned her attention to her lifelong dream of writing fiction and has now completed a number of short stories and her first novel: *Death Wins the Crown*, published in 2011. A second novel is in progress. She also gives tours at Georgia O'Keeffe's Home And Studio in Abiquiu, New Mexico. Barbara has just retired from the post of Distribution Editor at SCBR and will become a reviewer.

About herself, **Laura Strathman Hulka** says: "Born and raised in California, I spent nine years in Tennessee at the turn of the century, learning to speak Southern, and eight months in the Arizona desert, learning I really don't like heat! Presently, I live with my husband of 40 years and two dachshunds in senior apartments in Sacramento CA, near my children and grandsons. I consider myself a 'renaissance woman' with a wide variety of interests and enthusiasms, including reading, writing, baking, dogs, crafts and family (not necessarily in that order!). I taught myself to read at age four, from the back of cereal boxes at the breakfast table, and haven't stopped reading since." Laura, a former SCN board member, has just retired from her SCBR co-editorship and has become a reviewer.



Peggy Moody is SCBR's webmistress and has served as SCN's Executive Director since 2003. One of the team that founded SCN in 1997, she has co-chaired all of the Stories From the Heart conferences, maintains the websites, manages the national office, coordinates communications, and organizes support materials for the Board of Directors. At SCBR, she created and manages the software programs that track review copies and requests from reviewers, and posts reviews to the website. Peggy is also a Review Editor, and beginning in September, when she moves to the family's new home in Estes Park, CO, she will serve as Distribution Editor.

A New York Times bestselling author, **Susan Wittig Albert** has been working as a fulltime fiction writer since 1985, publishing fifty-plus mysteries, memoir, and nonfiction as well as sixty-some books for young readers. She has co-edited two anthologies for the Story Circle Network: *With Courage and Common Sense* (2004) and *What Wildness Is This: Women Write about the Southwest* (2007). She published her latest novel, *A Wilder Rose*, under her own imprint: Persevero Press. The book was named by Kirkus Reviews as one of the Indie Best Novels of 2013 and was a finalist for the WILLA Award in historical fiction. Susan lives on a 31-acre homestead in the Texas Hill Country, where she writes, gardens, and raises chickens. She is the founder and past president of SCN and serves as SCBR's Coordinating Editor. Her website: www.susanalbert.com





Mary Jo Doig says, "I have found so many ways to nurture my reader's/writer's soul in SCN since joining in 2001. When I reflect about the years past, I think of myself as 'SCN Homegrown,' from beginning to shyly and not confidently share some of my stories in w-ecircles 2 and 9, to becoming facilitator of the wonderful group of women in w-ecircle 7 in 2003 a few years later." Many of us know Mary Jo as the dedicated editor of *Story Circle Journal's* "True Words From Real Women" and the annual *Anthology*. She lives in the lovely Blue Ridge Mountains of rural Virginia. Mary Jo is a Review Editor.

Susan Schoch is a freelance writer and editor, specializing in memoir and personal history. She recently completed a biography of two revered ceramic artists, titled *The Clay Connection: Jim and Nan McKinnell* and is at work on another biographical project. She says, "It's always an honor and a fascinating journey to present someone's life story, something that Story Circle Network recognizes and fosters. My long membership in SCN has offered both motivation and fulfillment, so becoming part of Story Circle Book Reviews was a natural step. Every year, women write fine new books, and I'm glad for the opportunity to read and share the best of them. Working with remarkable women at SCBR, who share my enthusiasm and keep me growing, has been a wonderful bonus. When my attention is not on the page, it's often on family and friends, all of whom are above-average, of course. Sometimes the wildness calls me to solitary retreats, and sometimes the bliss is in sharing my garden, or making pictures, but writing or reading is always like coming home." Susan is a Review Editor at SCBR.



Judy M. Miller's writing niche is adoptive parenting, special needs, and tweens and teens. She has published hundreds of articles and essays in parenting, adoption magazines, and anthologies and is the author of the internationally known parent guide, *What To Expect From Your Adopted Tween*, and the creator of the popular class, *Parenting Tweens, Tweens & Beyond*. Her second book, focused on adopted adults, will be released soon. She lives with her husband and four kids, ages 12 through 20, in the Midwest. Judy is a Review Editor and a current member of SCN's Board of Directors. Read Pat Bean's interview [pp. 8-9] in this issue for more about her wide-ranging work. Her website: <http://judymmiller.com/>

A Review Editor at SCBR, **Linda Hoye** also served for several years as Distribution Editor and has been a member of SCN's Board of Directors. About herself, she says, "I'm a writer, editor, adoptee, and somewhat-fanatical grandma whose work has appeared in an assortment of publications in Canada and the US. My memoir, *Two Hearts: An Adoptee's Journey Through Grief to Gratitude* (2012), is the story of my journey through the abyss in search of the one thing I desperately wanted: family. I recently retired from corporate life and, along with my husband and our doted-upon Yorkshire Terrier, returned to my Canadian home land where I'm keeping busy in my garden, my kitchen, and at my writer's desk. Connect with me on my blog, *A Slice of Life Writing*" at: <http://lindahoye.com/>



Paula Stallings Yost served as the Coordinating Editor of SCBR (2001-2009). After a twenty-five-year career in public relations and journalism in Dallas, Paula returned to her roots in the piney woods of East Texas, working as lifestyles editor for a small-town daily newspaper. In 1999, she established *LifeSketches/Heirloom Memoirs Publishing*—a biography service dedicated to helping others preserve their personal and/or family histories. Later she served as co-editor of *What Wildness is This: Women Write About the Southwest*, SCN's anthology, and edited and contributed to *My Words Are Gonna Linger*, a guide to writing personal histories published by the Association of Personal Historians (APH). A former SCN board member and teacher in SCN's Online Class Program, she lives in East Texas. Her website: <http://www.alifesketch.com/> Paula is a Review Editor at SCBR.

If you would like to join the SCBR review team, go here for information: <http://www.storycirclebookreviews.org/reviewingforscbr.shtml> If you have a book to be reviewed, check out this page: <http://www.storycirclebookreviews.org/gettingreviewed.shtml>



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True Words from Real Women

Grace

A selection of short pieces of lifewriting by our members, edited by Mary Jo Doig. Please be sure that, if your story includes other people, you have not violated any privacy rights, that there is nothing defamatory in it, and that it does not infringe copyright or any other rights. Contribute your own True Words to the Journal. Future topics are listed on page 28.

A Quiet Blessing

Sandi Goforth, Bulverde TX
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My bedroom door creaked open into the pitch blackness of the hallway. Feeling my way, I tiptoed toward the sound of muffled snoring from my parents' room. The wooden door trim felt cold and I shivered. I shouldn't bother them. Three times in the last few weeks...I'm almost 11! But nothing stopped the nightmares. As a matter of fact, the rude intruders came so often that Mom made an appointment with our family doctor.

I stumbled over to her side of the bed where she purred softly. Just a whisper, "Mom, I had a bad dream," and without a sound she lifted the covers to invite my skinny frame. Slithering into the warmth of their bed like a little snake, I settled with my forehead to her chin. I hardly dared to breathe. Once again, she had allowed me, old as I was, into her sanctuary. And there I'd stay until the need for oxygen forced me to move.

The glorious smell of Lily of the Valley lingered from earlier when she donned her calico house dress and beige hose. Those cheeks of dewy cream, just inches away, so

like the powder puffs she used to dust them, all softness. Could we even imagine mom in pajamas? No. Silk and lace and ribbon.

Her name was Grace. Stoic, quiet. By sixty-five she would be rendered completely immobile by a debilitating muscle disease, transitioning from cane to walker, to wheelchair, to nursing home. All with the grace of her name.

But what did we know of the mysterious future, decades away? Tonight she held me, creating safety. Soon, growing hotter and hotter, cramped from lying so still, I'd slip out of the covers, and happy, I'd climb back into my own bed. Coolness brought instant sleep.

At breakfast, neither of us spoke of it. She'd go on buttering the toast, purse her lips in a half smile the way she always did. And then all during my school day, her love stayed on and on and on.

Grace. My quiet blessing.

A Fleeting Thought

Sara Fernandez, Lockhart TX

As we chase the sirens of the ambulance, I am sitting in the front passenger seat, not moving. No one is talking. I am not sure anyone is breathing.

I am unaware of my surroundings, yet I see the pavement moving quickly as I stare through the window. I reach for the door handle and remember this feeling from my childhood. I think to myself: *Not again. I cannot do this again.*

I search for a way to release myself from all feelings.

Suddenly, I stop. Something inside me makes me turn and face the back seat. I see someone so very dear to me.

She looks confused and truly scared. I realize that jumping out of this moving vehicle would change this child's life forever. To even think that such an act of selfishness is ludicrous.

I quickly collect myself and let go of the handle. No one knows about the thought that just crossed my mind.

I've looked into this child's eyes many times throughout my life, and I realize that she is the definition of saving grace. She has saved me so many times without even being aware of it. That is a true blessing.



The Lessons of Breast Cancer

Betsy Boyd, Maryville TN
bboyd2153@outlook.com

The day I got my diagnosis

I learned that invincibility is an illusion
and
that anger is a better motivator than fear.

The day I asked for a second opinion
I learned that statistics only measure what has happened to other people
in the past, not what is
happening in my life in the present

and
that even in the face of illness, I get to be the boss of me.

The day before I had a mastectomy and TRAM flap reconstruction

I learned how entertaining it can be to string along swear words to
create new phrases,
and
that Reiki can be very calming.

The day my sister shaved my head

I learned that, even with no hair, I'm still me
and
that I have a pretty smile.

The day I had a port put into my chest and the surgeon nicked my lung
and it collapsed

I learned that every breath is precious
and
to appreciate things that come in pairs.

The day I started chemo

I learned to be grateful for the kindness shown by nurses who were
pumping poison into my body
and
that hiccups always precede vomiting.

The day my friends from work showed up in my driveway with a van
full of homemade casseroles, fresh salads and organic meats

I learned to get over my aversion to green peppers
and
observed the faces of my friends relax the more I smiled and laughed.

The day my engagement ended

I finally
FINALLY
FINALLY
learned that I deserve to have a man in my life who can be true.

The day my support group friend died

I learned to not be smug about how well I was doing
because not everyone gets to experience breast cancer as a blessing the
way that I did.

Thirteen years later

I have learned that the events in our lives do not equal us; they are
merely the threads we use to weave the fabric of our lives
and
to be grateful for that golden thread that taught me, among other things,
to love green peppers and life.

Amazing Grace

Patricia Hollinger, Westminster MD
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Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound...
Just hearing the tune makes many a heart pound.

That saved a wretch like me!
Is what follows and causes me to plea.

For years those words haunted me,
I could not sing them...I could not agree.

I was NOT a wretch, "Damnit," I said,
From such words I often fled.

With religious angst and major depression,
These words reinforced a negative impression.

I changed the word *wretch* to a *soul* like me,
After hours and hours of therapy.

Yes, I was lost in the throes of religious zealots,
Their words often stung me like BB pellets.

Now I am found in the truth of my soul,
Seeking this became my ultimate goal.

My eyes had been blinded for many years,
As I heard sermons designed to elicit fears.

"Tis the grace of the presence of a listening ear,
As I poured out my hopes and fears,

That brought me home to my true self,
Never again in fear will I sit on a shelf.

Mom

L. F., Rowlett TX

Even when I was very young, I knew my
mom's name was Grace.

It really fit her. She was very passionate,
loving, and gifted. She would always ask how
my school day had been and always made my
favorite foods. I felt the love we had would
never end. But I grew older and things
happened. We no longer talked or laughed or
said that we loved each other.

When I was 32, I found out I had a tumor
in my stomach and needed surgery. By the
grace of God, my mother showed up that day,
and I made it through. Today, we once again
have a mother-daughter relationship. We write
to each other, and I look forward to once again
talking, sharing what I've learned, laughing
together, and keeping each other lifted up.

Ballet for Grace

Lois Ann Bull, Easton CT
lois@loisannbull.com • w-ecircle I

“Let’s play after school,” my best friend Karen said. “We could climb the tree in my front yard or ride our bikes to the brook and catch frogs.”

“Can’t,” I answered, “It’s Monday. I’ve got ballet.” Racing out of our third grade classroom, we separated halfway home.

Slamming our kitchen door behind me in protest, hoping my mother would hear, I ran up stairs, unbuttoning my shirt and ripping it out of the waistband. I threw the school clothes on the floor and grabbed my ballet practice costume—pale pink taffeta with ruffles, short as a bathing suit and just as bare. Ugh!

My tiny brown suitcase holding lamb’s wool, pink toe slippers, black ballet shoes, and black patent tap shoes waited on my dresser. I snatched the handle and flew back down the stairs. Mom waited at the back door, car key in one hand and my long Sunday coat over her arm. Did she really think the length would keep my bare legs warmer?

The drive took twenty minutes. According to my mother, the local teachers lacked refinement (probably

because they chewed gum during class) so she took me to a more affluent town and a classical teacher.

When my boiling anger cooled, I said, “Why do I have to do this?”

“Take ballet?”

“Yes.”

“Because, in polite society, good manners aren’t enough. Your body language has to be as polished as your speech. Ballet helps you learn how to move gracefully. I don’t want you clunking around like an elephant.”

“You think I move like an elephant?” my voice whined.

“No, of course not.”

By the seventh grade, when the girls’ softball team practiced on Monday afternoons, I asked to quit ballet. “Mom, am I graceful enough? I’d really rather play ball.

“Yes, Sweetheart, you’re a graceful young lady. We can stop the ballet.”

A Way of Life

Cindy Flora, Clearwater FL
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Making new friends when you are a certain age is not always easy and when given a choice to travel with a lifelong buddy or a fairly new one, the BFF (best forever friend) is usually the one chosen. But sometimes life’s circumstances intervene, and you find yourself on the road with the friend less traveled with.

Santa Fe beckons many and every year, for a while now, I have been fortunate enough to make a pilgrimage there for one reason or another. I have been there enough to know what I love best and what joys can be found in unlikely places and in simple things.

Even so, in the company of someone seeing everything for the first time, there are revelations to be made about New Mexico, friendship, and oneself.

“Do you think we’ll see a roadrunner?” Kathy asks excitedly as our shuttle bus approaches the Albuquerque rental car location.

“I hope so,” I reply. “One year I saw one racing across the parking lot!”

Spotting a roadrunner is a big deal to me, too, so I get and share her excitement. Alas, we are thwarted in this

quest but soon many other things replace that initial disappointment: dormant volcanoes, petroglyphs, mountains the color of watermelon, tumbleweeds, vintage neon signs, jackrabbits, art, hollyhocks, Route 66, sopapillas, *chile ristras*. Each day Kathy carefully records her discoveries and impressions—people, places, critters, food, and culture—with enthusiasm and joy. I am, supposedly, the writer, but I jot down nothing and am aware that I have never seriously considered taking notes before. I ponder that at length. But I am helping her with her discoveries, filling in the blanks as best I can as an outsider with some insight into the region. I am also making discoveries about myself and our friendship.

One definition of grace is a pleasing appearance or effect, charm, as it were, as in “all the grace of youth.”

I believe there is grace in the joyful pleasure expressed by anyone with a youthful outlook on life and all its possibilities

For my dear friend Kathy, grace is a way of life.

Purple Martins and Other Buddhas

Jazz Jaeschke, Austin TX
 sjazz@austin.rr.com • w-ecircle 4

It's their constant nature—each
 knowing self in relation to all,
 participating without hesitance—
 without resistance of any sort—
 in ritual communal gathering,
 day's independent forays
 ending shoulder-to-shoulder
 settling into dark-hours rest
 amid comfort of mirror images,
 each a tiny feathered essential
 to the quivering essence
 filling branches above urban parking lot.

Below a scattering of humans
 in a rare experience of oneness
 forgetting passions and politics—
 forgetting separate lives of any sort—
 here now in spontaneous harmony beneath vibrating cacophony
 as 500,000 small birds roost
 one more night before migrating—our eyes turn upward, hearts wide open,
 minds too busy inquiring to judge.

It's not a Bodhi tree.
 But beneath it, grace unfolds.

Grace of the Wing

Karen Mocker Dabson, Columbia MO
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With heedless grace, her wings spread wide,
 She's caught the thermal for a ride—
 Soaring, soaring ever higher
 O'er the placid countryside.

From here, the details of her head
 Picked out in shades of bloody red
 Cannot be seen to frighten, though
 She makes her living from the dead.

What grace uplifts this dark bird's flight
 And glides with her till edge of night,
 Despite her gruesome daily task?
 This certain, solemn, hard-earned rite

Helps find her balance in the air
 Where neither pain nor hard-worn care
 Can rough the pathway of her glide
 Nor mar the joy of being there.

Salt Water

Susan Rau Stocker, Four Oaks NC

The salt water teases my feet,
 encircling my ankles and
 grounding me into this present.

The foam rises and recedes
 like well-poured beer,
 or secret, sacred bubble bath.

The little guy in his baseball cap
 fills his yellow bucket
 and scurries back to his castle.

The color wheel flaunts every shade
 of blue from sky to sea
 to bikini to umbrella.

The burning beams pound
 in rhythm with the slick wet waves
 under the direction of the wanton wind.

The broken fragments of earlier life
 are tenaciously transformed
 into silky soft glittering granules.

Manic birds meet jumping fish
 in the ancient ecological dance
 of divine communion.

The ocean licks the beach clean
 although some shells, poor souls,
 have forgotten to book the return trip.

Yes, Ms. Dickinson, salt water heals
 because with this as the creation,
 the creator is pure grace.

Effortless Thoughts

Kathryn S., Lockhart TX

It's the summer of '77 on a
 sunny, breezy day. I hear birds
 chirping and singing in the trees.

My little sister is splashing in
 the shallow water. My brother is
 catching crawfish with his hands. I
 can hear the laughter of my mother
 and *me-ma* as they sit at the edge
 of the creek.

Granddaddy watches us all,
 sitting in his lawn chair and
 swinging his fly swatter round and
 round. My dad is fishing down at the
 creek, away from the noise.

My family is enjoying summer
 together, just being.

As I float down the creek on
 my inner tube with no one but me,
 I think I am controlling my path.
 But it's not me. It is the effortless
 grace of the current taking me on
 adventures of my imagination.

Where will it take me? From
 where I have come? What new
 place will I discover? I dream of
 adventures to be.

The joy of childhood
 memories is a constant in my mind.

Memories

Angel Halliburton, Somerset TX

My first kiss came from a boy who I used to meet every day at the old elementary school grounds.

Bobby and I met up every afternoon when school got out. I had the biggest crush on him. I would wait at the swings, and he would arrive with that smile on his face. I knew we only had a little time before he had to be back home for dinner.

He would push me on the swing. We would hold hands. We would sit by the big oak tree and kiss.

One day I was waiting for him, but he didn't come. I was mad. I couldn't believe he wasn't here. I waited for an hour, but no Bobby. I didn't go to school the next day. I was afraid he'd met another girl.

He'd actually been hit by a car. He had died.

When I was told, I ran to his house. His mother said he'd been on his way to the playground and had been excited about something. She handed me a little note, folded up like a football with my name on it. The note read: "I love you and I want you to be my girlfriend. Check yes or no. Love, Bobby."

Ten years later, I was back in that town to bury a family member. I returned to the playground at the old elementary school. I sat on the swing and remembered Bobby with grace.



The day was sunny, breezy, and cool. August 10, 2007 at 2 p.m. I stand in the courtroom; my oldest sister is standing on my right side. In front of me is this tall, handsome, young man. To his left is my sister's partner. To his right is the judge.

We are both 19. I think to myself: "Are we really doing this? I don't even know him. It's only been a week."

But as I look in his eyes, all the nervousness goes away. A calmness comes over me. My heart slows its pace. I feel connected to him, like electricity running through my veins. I feel as if we are becoming one, as if I've found my soul mate, as if God made us for each other.

Yet I ask myself again, "How can I love someone in such a short period of time?"

I love the passion in him and the comfort he gives me. He makes me feel things I never knew existed. Mainly I am happy. He brings me happiness.

Grace Under Pressure

Barbara Youngblood Carr, Austin TX
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In Germany we moved from Aschaffenburg to Mannheim. It was then I learned a lesson about grace under pressure.

Since movers packed stove parts in Aschaffenburg, I had to drive back there to return them. On Friday, I placed our two small boys in the Army post nursery and lunched with friends. That is probably where we contracted the meningitis virus.

The following Monday I awakened with a killer headache. At noon my husband said I looked worse, so in early afternoon he drove me to the Heidelberg Army Hospital. At Emergency Room, they thought I had polio and admitted me to the hospital. After a spinal fluid sample sent to Landstuhl diagnosed me with meningitis, I was put into isolation.

Two days later our son got a high fever with vomiting so he was also isolated in a room with a net over his crib so he couldn't climb out.

Meanwhile, news of my disease spread like wildfire. We were new there and had no friends in this military group. Since it was July several other men had applied for vacation time off, so allowing my husband to take leave because of illness was not popular. The Commander called the hospital to see if I was really sick enough to be there. Nobody would enter our quarters but several people left a casserole outside the door. My husband also needed to visit us in the hospital, but no one would babysit for him.

However his Captain's wife graciously volunteered to babysit. Other members of this group told her she should not come into our quarters and risk getting ill. She told me that when her son got polio, all her friends left her side so she promised God that if her son lived she'd help others in crisis like us and trusted that He would not allow her to get any terrible disease.

So, in spite of others who would not help us, telling her she should not help us either, she displayed great courage and grace under pressure and helped us in our time of need.

The Gift

Ramona C., Lockhart TX

I feel as if we are the only ones there. I feel him shaking. I look up and see his smile. I see the sparkle in his eyes. And I can tell that he does not feel that this is a huge mistake.

Finally, we are saying our vows, placing rings on each other's fingers, saying "I do!" He kisses his queen. I kiss my king. My dreams have come true. I pinch myself to see if I'm dreaming, but I'm not. I'm here. This is reality.

I continue to ask myself: "Will this work? Will I get hurt? Will I hurt him? Will this last a lifetime?" I tell myself that only days, weeks, months, and years will tell.

More than six years later, I can say that it is still working.

Lifetime, here we come. Hand in hand. Happiness awaits.

Contagious Grace

Sherrey Meyer, Milwaukie OR
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A few Sundays ago as we arrived for worship, we noted youth were leading the service. Having sat through similar services, we settled in and prepared for something less than exciting.

This group of 9th-12th graders, as youth before them, returned a day earlier from a mission trip to Pittsburgh, PA. Yes, a mission trip to Pittsburgh.

In previous years, participants shared a short report which sounded unprepared. For example:

“Hi, my name is Lisa. I had a really fun time. The flight was fun and the food was good. We had a great time meeting other youth members. My small group was, uh, okay, I guess. We worked hard. Thanks for your donations to help us out.”

Imagine 13 or 14 of these. Monotonous, stilted, repetitive. It's hot outside, no air conditioning, and other things to do today.

But wait! The first report evokes slight emotion. The next two hold listeners' attention. Our youth are articulate and excited, ready to share their stories.

Suddenly, you could hear a pin drop. Youth telling stories of people living in 100-year old row houses with peeling paint, dry rot, dirty basements, overgrown yards, plumbing problems grasped our hearts. We listened to stories of elderly, not so elderly, and unemployed individuals, a small number in poor health, each one needing help. The impact these conditions had on our youth members was stunning.

Small groups formed from hundreds of youths attending, with each group assigned to a resident. Our youth worked hard at repairing buildings others call home and forged new relationships with strangers. During their hard work, strangers became people the youth cared for and who cared for them, if cookies and peach cobbler prepared by one resident means something.

Young people left home unaware of what they might find. Equipped with smiles and faith, they hammered, plumbed, cleared debris, cleaned. In so doing, they extended grace to strangers with whom they became friends.

These same youth returned home and shared their stories that Sunday morning. Many of us left God's house equipped with a large dose of their contagious grace.

In the Mist of Tears

Roxinia Ware, Del Valle TX

The way I see it, God has always given me much grace.

Grace was there when I walked the streets late at night. Grace was there when I was jumping in and out of cars with strangers, never knowing if I would return. Grace was there when guns and knives were pulled on me yet I'm here to tell about it.

Money Doesn't Come in the Mail

Deborah Bean, Rowlett TX
DebandNeal.com

At 21 you'd have pegged me for a “welfare mother.” Back in 1977, when my first husband abandoned me, leaving me with two babies, lots of women lived on welfare. But I wanted more for myself. I didn't want to teach my children that money came in the mail.

The first job I got, I waitressed. I also drank and partied a lot, and met a lot of jerks. I was looking for Prince Charming. Then, one day, I looked in the mirror and asked, “What are you doing?” There had to be more, I believed, so, with that question in mind, I went out and found a clerical job. The pay was actually less; but it was a step. Soon, I worked at the Hog Marketing Board.

This was not a job for the squeamish. We counted and sorted tickets taken from slaughtered hogs. Unfortunately, sometimes part of the hog came with the ticket, such as blood, fat, and other things. The additional self-confidence I acquired persuaded me to go to college.

For the next eight years, I worked two jobs and took college classes part-time. I finally realized I was smart; making those straight A's helped. Over time came new jobs, better skills, and a growing self-image. I still made lots of mistakes but I was making progress. Eventually, I quit dating jerks.

So who am I now? I'm a respected computer consultant. I'm a published author. And my second husband is a partner to me.

My life has been cluttered with heart-ache and joy. As my children slowly forgave me for the shortcomings of becoming a mother too young, I've learned to accept them for who they really are. For this grace of the heart, I am grateful.

But the best reward has come from my children as they've matured and looked for partners who complement and strengthen them as my new husband does for me. When my daughter was going through a difficult time, she told me that part of her inspiration was me. “Because Mom, you taught us to never give up and that money doesn't come in the mail.”



In my addiction, grace kept me alive and brought me through it all. I often wonder how I was so blessed to receive such grace—even when God told me to go right and I instead went left.

I am here today only because of such grace. In the mist of my tears, I know God's grace is still here.

The Grace of Chronic Illness

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I consulted authors as diverse as the Dalai Lama and Annie Lamott. And then there was Philip Simmons, who was only thirty-five years old when he learned that he had ALS, or Lou Gehrig's Disease. The young husband and father chronicled his last days in a beautiful little book, *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life*. Simmons maintained that every day was precious for him because he knew the end was near and, for us, because we cannot know how long we have to live.

I have also been deeply affected by the writings of Nancy Mairs, an Arizona essayist who has struggled with Multiple Sclerosis for decades. She can be very funny, but she's not shy about expressing her anger. She doesn't like living in a wheelchair. Who would? Her occasional grumpiness gives me permission to complain if I feel like it. When she writes about her spiritual evolution in the midst of physical decline, she gives me hope.

Months of reading, writing, thinking, and praying have brought me to some conclusions, not exactly the faith of my childhood, but consoling, nonetheless. I can't believe I'm facing a void when I die. I'm convinced there is another dimension. What is that dimension? I don't know. I'm not even sure it will be the same for each soul.

I'm grateful for the grace of Parkinson's Disease, the uninvited guest that has forced me to wrestle with my fears of the unknown. Years ago at our parish grade school, the nuns taught to pray for the grace of a happy death. Today I pray rather for a grace-full exit.



The Components of Grace

Helene Benardo, Bronx NY
w-circles 15 and 9

To me, grace is kindness and compassion, which is also my definition of religion.

Many years ago, when my children were quite young, my husband suffered a debilitating kidney stone attack.

My parents rushed over to stay with my sons so I could drive my husband to the hospital. As it turned out, he was in such agony that my father said he would drive so I could sit with him in the back seat.

We stayed in the hospital for several hours while my husband was looked at and treated. Finally, it was time to go home.

We came into my house. My mother met us at the door. After asking about my husband's health, she had us sit down and made us a cup of tea.

This all occurred on Yom Kippur. My father had never driven on that day; my mother had never prepared food.

This was true grace.

Don't Miss the Message

Mary A., Galveston TX

Tick, tock. I watch the clock....

My appointment is running behind now by two hours. I'm waiting for my ultrasound. I am seven months along in my pregnancy and moody as hell. Why is this taking so long? Should I leave and make an appointment for another day? I truly want to get out of here and tell all these people where to go.

But a voice tells me to wait a little longer. Now is the time to be still.

Apparently, they are running so far behind that they start to ask patients to reschedule. I decide to wait as others leave.

Finally, I am called. The technician turns on the ultrasound machine and tells me I'm her last patient for the day. She's heading out for vacation.

Click. Click. Click. Over and over my baby's heart. "Don't move," she tells me. "Be really still."

I slowly start to realize that something is wrong. My eyes fill with tears.

In less than an hour, a full team of doctors are focused on my baby's heart. The valves did not grow properly. A baby cannot live with a defect like this.

There is even a recommendation that I terminate my pregnancy.

I close my eyes and pray to God to please let my baby be healthy and strong. I hear back that my son will live and that I should go home and prepare for the storms I must weather.

At five days old, my son undergoes heart surgery. Thirteen years later, by the grace of God, he remains healthy.

Accepting Grace

Barbarann Ayars, Medina OH
w-ecircle 9

We come together in huge bites, rooting around at soul level, mind melding, drinking deep the drafts of our lives, barely coming up for air. So much to savor as we share each other's many years apart.

We sit tucked into the tired, cushioned sofa well into the wee hours, bathed in low lamplight, our voices rising and falling to disturb the late night silence, exploring the sands of our still unfolding lives. We tread swiftly across the trivial and stride right into the depths of transforming faith, mine as old as nearly all my years, hers fresh and sparkling as a newly minted coin.

She marvels at her longtime resistance to the wellspring of God's eternal love, recalls her flight from that holy touch on her shoulder, hiding from One who allowed so much pain. That Creator who chased her across the span of her life with an unswerving desire to be known, to reel her into the Presence of peace that passes understanding,

to be found only in boundless grace, that gift we can't fathom. I'm overwhelmed with joy for her, my heart bursting. Love composed of unimaginable richness, freely given, undeserved, unearned, never denied, boundless, hardly comprehended because we have no capacity to love like that, that implausible gift we call grace.

I give her words I lean upon, from an old hymn of my childhood. *Wonderful grace, setting my spirit free...saved.* I tell her that grace and mercy are free.

"Sing it to me" she asks, so I do. She's tearful, thinking about her young son lost to suicide decades ago. I tell her I believe his face will be the first she'll see in eternity. Here, we see darkly. There, face to face. Here, she carries her boy in her heart. There, she'll know him forever.

"How are you so sure?" she asks, full of hope.

"Because of grace, the ultimate love."

Joanie

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

Minnesota blonde with pale blue eyes, Joanie was a life-long diabetic.

She chose motherhood precipitating a decade long diabetic decline.

Daughter Julie gave her reason to stretch her days as long as possible.

As wife of owner-editor of the local newspaper, she wore the status of beloved community icon with amazing grace.

Despite diminishing vision, she hosted a large gathering of town residents, circled the room, welcomed each guest personally identifying them by voice more than vision.

She drove around town in a large blue Cadillac with Julie as her eyes.

Everybody knew. How is Joanie today? they asked each other.

At her funeral we sang, *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound...I once was blind but now I see....*

The Graceful Miss Julie

Deborah Sheffield, Tallahassee FL
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Her voice is calm and lyrical,
well-read with good intentions.
Gentle cashmere soft,
she glides lightly through the glass
with her mind precision sharp.
A swan poised with words well-chosen;
Heart filled with compassion and
mettle of steel. Her garden tended
to beauty... quiet dreams of Giverny.
Where a child is safe and
nurtured, calm in her care;
evermore to feel loved;
forever longing to be there.

The Decision

Mary Devries, Hutchinson KS
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w-ecircle 1 and w-ecircle 6

She found herself in a place she never wanted to be or ever expected. Her marriage was ending, and she had had to face the reality that it had been dead for years. There had been no sharing, no compassion; everything was gone even the occasional session of heated sex. It was over.

Now she was faced with a decision how was she going to handle the rupture. She had seen friends go through the crisis of divorce screaming, crying, and besmirching the ex-husband. She had watched their friends recoil from the

viciousness, and children shrivel, as they had to deal with the anger. She was hurt, and she felt she had tried as hard as any person to mend the break. Yet, it took two to mend fences. She had found herself trying alone and now she had to go forward.

Locking the door to the house and to her heart, she left with her head high and silence as her wardrobe. She turned her back on the old life and stepped into the new. She chose grace.



Grace & Ray

There is a 9-year-old girl at our church whose name is Grace. Her mom brings her periodically to the Breakfast Club, where we prepare a nutritious breakfast twice a month for anybody who comes through the door. We usually feed between 100 to 200 homeless or simply poor people. Grace has been coming since she was little and has worked on the serving line, helping dish out the food. She is quiet and helpful and a bit shy when it comes to interacting with all of us adults.

About a month ago, Grace told her mom that she wanted to start a “movement” to help the homeless. She had already made a sign asking people to donate clothes and she asked if she could put a box in front of their house and also one at her mom’s work. Her mother agreed, but confided to her friends that she hoped that, “Grace’s faith in human compassion was correct.”

Full of Grace

Len Leatherwood, Beverly Hills CA

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Last Saturday, we had our usual Breakfast Club. From my vantage point in the kitchen, I saw Grace and her mom arrive and my husband, Ray, the coordinator of the Breakfast Club, greet them. After exchanging a few quiet words, Ray headed off in one direction while they walked back out the door. The next thing I knew, Ray was dragging in two large shelves and Grace and her mom were back with several boxes. It wasn’t long before the shelves were filled with clothes and our breakfast guests were quietly sifting through different sizes and styles to find clothing they could wear.

Later, all of us volunteers gave Grace a round of applause for her fine work. She looked pleased, but also a little surprised. It was clear from her reaction that she had spearheaded this effort for only one reason: there are those among us who need our help.

A little girl’s mission teaches us all a great truth. When you operate from the belief that people will act with compassion, they will often prove you right. That is called living up to another’s expectations.

After all, grace begets grace.

Esta’s Words

Abby November, Austin TX

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Judith Helburn Writing Circle, Austin TX

My childhood Girl Scout Troop attended the *Nutcracker* ballet at the New York City Ballet Center. It was magical. We rode the rumbling, smoky subway into the bowels of the East River tunnel until we arrived in the Big Apple, then we walked uptown to the Ballet. I never thought that humans could be so delicate, graceful, and controlled. I couldn’t wait to tell my grandmother, my mom, and sisters about the magical show. The men in the family were either too old, too busy, or in diapers. I told my mom, “I want to be a ballerina,” to which she replied, “You are a klutz. Besides, you have piano legs like cousin Francie.”

Funny, since all the women in my family have big feet, and legs, and big mouths. Thus, my career ended before it started! I spent the remainder of the day buried in my pillow on the bed I shared with my older sister, Esta.

Esta patted me, and said, “There are many graceful things in the world to be, besides a ballerina.”

“Can I wear a tutu?”

“No,” she said “but beauty and grace surround us even in Brooklyn. Go with Daddy to the Botanical Gardens where he takes photographs of the lovely birds and butterflies. Watch their wings and flight. See how the flowers sway in the breeze.”

Esta’s words made me experience the natural grace around us. She was a painter and captured the color of beauty and movement. She didn’t dance or soar, but she found grace in her moments of prayer. As she lay dying of ALS she illustrated the ultimate level of grace as she accepted God’s plan for her and welcomed her to the next world.

Changing Lanes

Quiana Brown, Temple TX

I was roaming the streets of Waco, drugged, depressed, bewildered, lost. I was hiding from my family and loved ones.

I’d been drugging for two years or more. When I first started, I was able to control the drugs. But then they took control of me. They eventually started making me hallucinate and feel paranoid.

At this point, I’d been out for three days with no contact with the man I loved.

He was very scared and worried. He started praying for my safe return.

He started blaming himself and got so upset that he beat his head against the wall. He eventually broke a hole through the wall with his head.

When I finally made it home, he had a big knot on his head and two black eyes.

That’s when I had to choose.

I didn’t want to lose everyone I loved, so I finally chose them over drugs.

Eventually, I gained the urge to draw closer to God as well. And that is where I am today, gracefully walking with my Higher Power.

Every Day Grace

Ronda Armstrong, Des Moines IA
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Today some families eat apart or on the run, too scheduled and too connected to gadgets to gather for meals. During my Kansas childhood in the 1950s and 60s there was no question: we ate supper together at the table.

By the time Dad swung his pick-up into the driveway about 5 p.m., after a full day at his sand and gravel business, the table was set with colorful Fiesta ware and the meal ready for final preparations. After we dished up the food, Mom, Dad, and I took our places around the gray formica table in the southeast corner of the kitchen. Grandma joined us during the winter months she stayed with us.

Once seated, we bowed our heads as I recited a brief grace, one Mom taught to me.

“Lord Jesus, be our holy guest...”

I don’t recall its original source. The few lines anchored us, a reminder of the divine guest always present. While passing dishes and filling our plates, we talked little. After tasting a few bites we started to visit.

For larger family gatherings we moved to the dining room, snapping in leaves, covering the table with one of the special cloths selected from the stack in the built-in linen cupboard in the hallway. For these meals Aunt Grace often offered the blessing, and if she wasn’t present, my mother, until I was old enough to do it. The spontaneous heartfelt prayers included gratitude for those congregated and those who were not, and requests to bless food for our bodies’ use in the Lord’s service.

Whether kitchen or dining room, saying grace engendered gratitude. Although preceding minutes might reflect chaos or worry, reverently bowing our heads slowed us down and humbled us.

During my teen banner-making phase, I snipped letters from bright yellow and orange felt, arranging the first line of the every day grace on moss-green burlap. The banner hung by the kitchen table, transforming the nook into a holy place. It stayed there until 1988 when we cleared out the house, preparing it for sale.

Ashes

Kasey Thomas, Lockhart TX

November 23, 2009. I am a dark, empty, lonely soul. My heart is cold. My feelings are numb. All emotion is gone.

I did not know that day would be the first day of a brand new start for me.

I had fought a lot of battles. Few had been won, leaving me feeling like a lost soul, a lifeless woman.

That was then. After four and a half years of more battles fought, I can now say they have all been won, even in the loneliest place on Earth.

It is amazing what happens when you truly find yourself in the midst of being ripped of all you’ve ever known. Four and a half years of finally seeing what and who is real, and what and who is fake. Learning that being a little selfish isn’t such a bad trait. It might save my life when I leave this place.

Finding myself has taught me to love and be loved, given me passion and compassion, given my lifeless soul a beautiful light that all can see.

I am full. I am free. What was once ashes is now my grace.

The Butterfly Whisperer

Sara Etgen-Baker, Anna UT
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I entered Whispering Pines where I found the large French doors of the day room flung wide open; the air—light and fresh—gently blew the long, crisp, white curtains to and fro. I walked through the door, the morning sunshine shimmering through the pine trees, and saw Pop sitting on the verandah surrounded by a rabble of butterflies.

He was slumped over in his wheelchair, his limp left arm tied to the chair’s railing. He looked up and waved with his good hand. “Sara!” he called with delight. I caught my breath and fought back the tears.

“Re...re...remember?” He flashed me a smile. “Bu...bu...butterflies!” Since his stroke, Pop couldn’t form full, flowing sentences—just words and even those came out slowly.

“Yes, I remember!” I squeezed his hands. “When one of your monarchs emerged from its chrysalis, you showed me how to guide it to walk on my finger. That was my first memorable butterfly encounter!” I scooted a chair next to him; we held hands, and the hours imperceptibly passed as we watched the butterflies.

I was 35 when my father first introduced me to his butterflies. “Why are you raising butterflies?” I asked.

“I witness grace.”

“Grace?” I chuckled for even then Pop was a man of few words. “I don’t understand.”

“After the chrysalis is formed, the butterfly faithfully waits in its dark cocoon—unable to move, to see, or to care for itself. But in that mysterious darkness, it’s not afraid. It bears the unbearable, not knowing, and trusts in something bigger that’s calling it to change. That’s grace.”

We continued watching butterflies on the verandah until the afternoon sun told me it was time to go. I kissed Pop on the cheek. “Gra...gra...grace,” he said. “Stroke is gra...gra...grace. I not a...a...afraid.”

Pop’s words soothed my broken heart. Although his stroke had wrapped him in a dark cocoon where he was unable to move, to speak, or care for himself, Pop wasn’t afraid. He was bearing the unbearable not knowing and trusting in something bigger that was calling him to change. Grace had strengthened him.

Free Falling

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The sun casts a glow across the empty desks in the classroom where I'm subbing. Around me is silence; and for the next few moments, I feel myself slowing down. I rewind the harried, unpredictable pace of my life.

The pace of my life had moved faster than I could grasp, and I'd lost touch with my inner life. But this morning, I woke early enough for a jog along the wooded trails near my home, something weather hadn't permitted me to do in weeks. There in the open stillness and empty trails, a space opened up inside me that hadn't been accessible for months. Although this space is hard to define, I knew I needed it. While running, I touched upon it; when I did, I pressed upon a tender spot, a bruise, a discomfort that was somehow welcome and oddly necessary. I inhaled and filled my lungs; I exhaled and released the tightness that I'd been holding onto.

Holding on seemed like the only way to handle the past few months, intense months filled with great uncertainty and endless questions that swirled through my mind. Would my mother-in-law survive her stroke? Would our condo sell? Would we find a new home? What do we do if our condo sells before we find a new home? What are we looking for in a new home? Would our choice be the right one? Would my husband be able to fully retire? Would my memoirs find their readers?

In the absence of having definitive answers to these questions, I squared my shoulders each morning; forged forward like a warrior; and hit the ground running, never looking up until the day's activities and responsibilities were complete. Nights, I searched for ways to hit the off switch and silence the endless questions that had no answers.

As the sun lights up my classroom, I realize there are no answers to my questions. Life is full of unanswerable questions and unexpected grace. Grace comes in stretching my arms wide open, pushing off the ledge, letting go, and trusting the free fall that is life.

Before The Gloaming

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They sat together at a small wrought-iron table, facing east, silently watching the swallows pulse and throb against the slate sky. The yellow marigolds were holding the last light of the sun, and glimmered brightly against the darkening Sierras. In the far distance, a sliver of moon had just begun to rise.

"So, is this it for me then?" she said softly, unexpectedly. "Is this it?"

She had wheeled her chair slightly to the right and was now facing her. The question hung there, over the little table, like a leaf suspended in a soft eddy, or a feather floating up in a puff of breeze. Her heart contracted against the question that she knew was coming, and now had arrived.

An attendant pushed through the doors and walked hurriedly to the adjoining building, smiling briefly at them as she passed. When the attendant had gone, she looked at her mother and said, "Well, Mom, let's see how all this goes, how well you rehabilitate."

She hated her answer and it had humiliated her. She thought it wasn't fair that her mother had asked it, not at this point, and that it had forced her into diplomatic insincerity.

Of course this was it, of course it was.

Her mother loved nature, loved the spring flowers and the turning leaves in the fall, and so they became ritualistic in their outings. They, her mother in the front seat next to her and her sister in the back, would stop and collect the brightest leaves for her to press between the pages of old magazines and well-worn books. As the time passed, she wanted to go less and less, and more frequently would say, "Not today, sweetheart. I'm just not up to it today."

As time went on, when they did go out, her mother could only point to the fall colors and say, "Orange," or "yellow." And then it got so stripped that she said nothing at all. And then, finally, it all stopped and, like a soft star in the gloaming sky, she blinked away.

Saying Grace

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Saying grace was a family ritual. Sometimes we sang it, sometimes we said it, but it was always part of our evening meal at home. In those days we four ate at home almost all of the time unless we were on a family vacation trip or celebrating a very special occasion. As a child I never questioned why we said grace. My brother and I were taught that we should thank God for our food, and should ask God to bless the hands that grew it and prepared it.

Now that I stop to think about the word "grace," however, it seems rather strange to use those two words together: "say grace." Does grace happen because I say it? How does grace really happen? Many beautiful words have been written about the idea of grace, but who knows what

causes grace? If I express appreciation to the tired-looking check-out person at the grocery store, am I "saying grace?" Perhaps if I telephone an old friend who is going through a rough time, just to listen, I am "saying grace." If I share an experience or idea which has enriched my own life, I just might be saying grace at the same time.

Our children are grown and gone from our home, and we have abandoned the ritual of saying grace at the dinner table, but maybe we should start a new ritual of saying grace many times during the day, not with the traditional words but through thoughtful actions and concern for others. Doing this might also make us more aware of the times when others "say grace" into our lives!



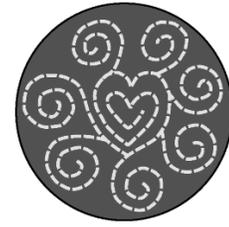
Internet Chapter:

Relationships Nourish Us

by Lee Ambrose

In 2015, Story Circle Network's Internet Chapter will turn 15! Look to the SCN Journal, the SCN Monthly e-Newsletter and the SCN Internet Chapter Monthly e-Newsletter over the remainder of this year as we gear up for a grand celebration in print to honor Internet

Chapter founders and its members - past and present.



An often-recurring issue for members of any circle is the varying degree of participation. For years I've contended that there is an ebb and flow to the level of participation in our circles that is much like the tide – at times it is high, other times it is low – very low. There is no doubt in my mind that when women join our e-circles they have every intention of being regular participants. But then life happens and the best-laid plans go astray. At times when participation is good, bonds are formed and circles thrive. When participation levels decline, the circles either find ways to cope with what is hopefully a temporary situation, or they end up folding into another, more active circle. But alas, at some point in time, every circle experiences a decline in its participation levels.

What then, is the impetus that keeps propelling the circles with low participation levels forward? It is the tightly knit bond that has been formed by the women within the circle. When one of the circles I belong to experienced an almost universal drop in submissions, the question was posed by the facilitator: "Do we want to fold this circle or try to get back on track?" The response was a resounding, "We will ride it out!" Some went so far as to say that to do anything other than that would be like breaking up a family because its members had become overly busy.

The goal of the circle is to have every member submit a story or poem every month and to have all members respond to each submission. While we each have our own reasons for why we write, what can be said of all circle members' stories is that they are a form of conversation between members. The stories are powerful conversations that forever bind the members together. Author Lysa TerKeurst writes "Relationships nourish us in ways nothing else can. It's the relationships that help unrush us. Connecting with those we love is like soul food."

TerKeurst has captured the essence of what makes our circles work so well – even when participation levels fall to less than optimal levels. She goes on to say, "Conversational threads are what make up the fabric of relationships. We must take time – make time – to talk." Her point is well taken, and if I may paraphrase her thoughts, if our stories are conversations that help to form relationships... and if relationships help to unrush us and nourish us like soul food, then we must take time – make

time – to write and share our stories! We owe it to ourselves and to all the women in our respective circles.

If you belong to a circle that is thriving, enjoy every moment of it, and encourage your sister circle members to keep up the good work by being that "gentle responder" to others' stories. If your circle has been rather quiet, take heart. I've seen circles on the verge of shutting down rise from the depths and reach new heights. The same can happen for you and your circle.

If you have been unable to participate as much as you'd like, perhaps it's time to take stock of what's going on in your life and what you can shift to allow you the opportunity to rekindle your conversations (to make time) with your circle sisters. Concentrating on making a renewed commitment to the circle and your writing might be just what you need to help you get back on track. If you've been stockpiling your monthly prompts in the hopes of one day getting around to writing about all of them, stop! Pick one – just one – and write about it, submit it and move forward.

If you can't imagine how you'll ever be able to respond to all the submissions of your circle-mates, send them a note and explain what's going on and why you've been so quiet. I guarantee that they will understand – and forgive the lack of response. Chances are they've been in your shoes before. And if they've not experienced that overwhelming backlog yet, chances are they will.

TerKeurst is right; "relationships nourish us in ways nothing else can." Let's all make an effort to honor the precious relationships we have here at Story Circle Network and do all that we can to nourish one another's soul through the sharing of your stories and responses.



"Shared joy is a double joy; shared sorrow is half a sorrow."

—*Swedish Proverb*



An SCN Retreat at Festival Hill:

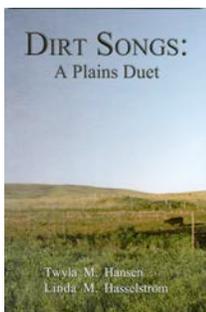
LifeLines: with Linda M. Hasselstrom

Mark your calendars and join us for a women-only weekend lifewriting retreat, led by Linda M. Hasselstrom, at the beautiful Festival Hill on May 15-17, 2015. Registration is open now at <http://www.storycircle.org/LifeLines/frmregister.php>.

"Everything is Material: Writing Your Story's Truth"
Linda M. Hasselstrom says,

"The theme of our work together this weekend will be autobiography, discovering and defining the story of your own life and revealing its truths. I want you to leave this workshop with your journal or laptop bursting with ideas for personal essays or poetry that will tell your story in the way only you can." Take-home materials will include examples of writing as well as suggestions for writing practices to inspire your writing for months and years to come, including explorations of language, memory, choice of details, structure and development, the use of journals as a writing aid, as well as the importance of thinking and of revision.

About the Facilitator: Linda M. Hasselstrom



Linda M. Hasselstrom's published writing includes fourteen books of nonfiction and poetry centering on her life story. She's published in periodicals as diverse as Reader's Digest, Bloomsbury Review, Orion, High Country News, Saturday Evening Post and Dry Creek Review. See and hear her recite her poetry on YouTube or on her website at: <http://www.windbreakhouse.com>. Since 1996, Hasselstrom has been resident writer of Windbreak House

Writing Retreats, established on her ranch. Her most recent book *Dirt Songs: A Plains Duet* with Nebraska State Poet Twyla Hansen (Backwaters Press, 2011) received the Nebraska Book Award for Poetry 2012 and was a finalist for best poetry book, High Plains Book Awards, Billings, MT, and finalist, WILLA award for poetry, Women Writing the West, both in 2012. She is special consultant to the Rural Literature R.A.L.L.Y. initiative, State University of New York, Buffalo, NY, and holds an M.A. degree from the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Read Lisa Shirah-Hiers' interview with Linda, and Susan Wittig Albert's reviews of Linda's books, *No Place Like Home*; *Leaning into the Wind*; & *Between Grass and Sky: Where I Live and Work*. All of these readings are

available at the Story Circle Book Reviews site: <http://www.storycirclebookreviews.org/interviews/hasselstrom2.shtml>.

About the Location: Festival Hill

Festival Hill Located in historic Round Top, Texas, 75 miles east of Austin, The International Festival-Institute was founded in 1972 by world-renowned concert pianist James Dick and has developed superb year round education and performance programs. It has also created a unique 200-acre campus—Festival Hill—containing major performance facilities, historic houses, extensive gardens, parks and nature preserves. Through its singular collection of rare books, manuscripts, archival material, music and historic recordings, photographs and objects, the Festival-Institute is also known as an important center for research and scholarly study. Planted with thousands of trees and bushes of various species, Festival Hill offers visitors lakes, picnic areas, jogging trails, and wonderful herb gardens.

We'll have triple-occupancy accommodations (three twin beds in each room). Dinner on Friday evening, 3 meals on Saturday (including continental breakfast), continental breakfast on Sunday, and drinks/snacks during breaks are included.

Because we want an intimate retreat, where we can really talk & listen & hold each other's stories as sacred, we are able to accept a limited number of participants. We expect these places to fill very quickly, so register NOW!



Visit the webpage for this much-anticipated Story Circle LifeWriting Retreat at:
<http://www.storycircle.org/LifeLines/>



From the Blogs:

Telling HerStories One Woman's Day



by Linda Hoye

Telling HerStories and One Woman's Day are the Story Circle Network blogs; women writers sharing their passion for the art and craft of lifewriting. Visit the blogs at: <http://storycirclenetwork.wordpress.com>.

We love being able to introduce new writers to readers of our One Woman's Day blog, so we were delighted to feature a post by **Morgan O'Donnell** recently. Morgan writes about how she is experiencing the shift from summer to autumn a bit differently this year as she focuses on writing the story of her life.

Summer is waning. I know this because the soft glow that seeps through the blinds comes later each morning. I know this because each evening the rich shades of burnt sienna and crimson and twilight lavender color my living room wall earlier. Normally, the end of my summers are frantic, filled with hurried preparation for the fall semester, advising new graduate students who are worried about being back in class after many years, and calming faculty who are wrestling with ornery technology for their online classes. Usually, I am so busy that I barely register the change in light as autumn comes creeping in.

This summer is different. This summer, for the first time in well over a decade, I am not involved in the fall semester prep, filled with both excitement and stress. Instead, I have left my job in higher education to take a break and see what I can do with these words and ideas that have been tumbling around in my head for so long. Instead of putting them into emails that welcome and calm new students or memos that cajole and console weary faculty, or impromptu pep talks to coworkers, I want to see

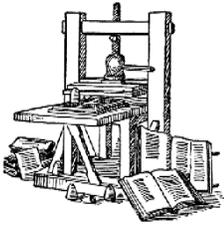
if I can wrangle these words and ideas into the shape of a book.

Each time I tell my story of how I ended up in the mountains of New Mexico watching summer wane, I realize there are many beginnings to it, not just one. The career mentoring sessions with my dean was one beginning. Listening to my boss tell stories of her close friend who had always talked of writing mysteries and then suffered from early onset Alzheimer's before those ideas reached paper was another beginning. Yet a third beginning was seeing people smile or hearing them chuckle over some quip or crazy Tumblr post I created and realizing that just maybe I could add a little fun to someone's life. Each time I tell the story I learn something new myself, some little nugget I hadn't recognized before.

So this summer, for the first time in years, I am measuring my days by the waning light, the gentle chill of the pre-dawn darkness, and the feel of my pen as it glides over paper while I wait to discover where the story will take me.

Morgan O'Donnell has done a little bit of everything from serving as a non-commissioned officer in the U.S. Army to public relations coordinator for a boys' ranch to graduate advisor. She has spent the last 10 years guiding college students of all ages. You can follow Morgan's adventures in the Land of Enchantment at www.morgankodonnell.com.

What can you say about a day in your life in five hundred words or less? A lot, if you ask the over sixty Story Circle Network members whose stories we've been privileged to share on our One Woman's Day blog. We would love to have the opportunity to share a story about a day in your life too. Learn more, and find a link to our One Woman's Day blog submission page at <http://onewomansday.wordpress.com/about/>.



Members in Print & The News

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

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

May (These didn't make it in time for the June issue of the Journal)

On May 26, 2014, **Ruth Crocker** was one of twelve Gold Star Wives invited to a Memorial Day Breakfast at the White House. Breakfast was held in the State Dining Room and each woman had official photos taken with President Obama. Ruth presented copies of her memoir, *Those Who Remain: Remembrance and Reunion After War*, to the President and Vice-President. (Gold Star Wives are women who lost their husbands in war or afterwards from war-related injuries. Ruth's husband was killed in Vietnam.)

Betsy Kelleher's book, *Sometimes a Woman Needs a Horse*, is now available as a revised second edition. After the original publisher of this book went out of business in January, 2014, Betsy decided to give the book new life and signed with Xulon Press.

Georgia Hubley's story, "Archie the Angel," will appear in *Chicken Soup for the Soul: The Cat Did What?* (August 19, 2014). Also, her story "Sister Friends" appears in the recently released *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Just us Girls*.

June

Jennifer Moyer's memoir, *A Mother's Climb Out of Darkness*, was released.

Fran Simone reports that she attended the Book Expo America in NYC to promote and sign her book, *Dark Wine Waters: A Husband of a Thousand Joys and Sorrows*, which will be published by Central Recovery Press in July, 2014.

Debra Winegarten had two books published in April. *Oveta Culp Hobby: Colonel, Cabinet Member, Philanthropist*, from UT Press, is a biography on the life of an extraordinary Texas woman—she designed and ran the Women's Army Corps for World War II and was the second woman in the US appointed to a presidential cabinet, Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. *Where Jewish Grandmothers Come From*, by Sociosights Press, is the sequel to her award-winning poetry chapbook, *There's Jews in Texas?*

Jude Walsh Whelley was awarded third place in the Antioch Writers' workshop/Dayton Daily News Short Story Contest for her essay "Thank You."

July

Sallie Moffitt's personal essay about child abuse won an award for Excellence in Literary Nonfiction at the 2014 Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference in Grapevine, Texas, July 18-20, 2014.

Juliana Lightle's latest book, *On the Rim of Wonder*, was published in April.

Marilea Rabasa's memoir about her daughter and herself, *A Mother's Story: Angie Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, has recently been published.

Fran Simone's book, *Dark Wine Waters: A Husband of a Thousand Joys and Sorrows*, has just been published; see her blog: <http://centralrecoverypress.com/books/darkwinewaters/blog/> for more details. The book was reviewed in *The Library Journal*.

Judy Miller's reading, "Between Us," (watch it on YouTube) is from her 2014 live show featuring motherhood.

Jude Whelley was interviewed by the Dayton Daily News for an article on Story. Jude tells us, "In addition to the recent Story Corps van being here and collecting and recording local stories, and some local storytelling groups, there was a lovely piece about Story Circle Network, our mission and offerings, and our web page address."

Sara Etgen-Baker has two pieces being published soon: one (a story about her weight loss) will appear in *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Reboot Your Life*, due to be released in September 2014; the other, entitled "Butterfly Whisperer," is in the June issue (page 9) of PraiseWriters' Magazine.

August

Ruth Crocker has a new book trailer (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rDzJyeXi5ss>) for her memoir, *Those Who Remain: Remembrance and Reunion After War*.

Susan Wittig Albert's book, *A Wilder Rose*, has been named a finalist of the Historical Fiction category in the 2014 WILLA Literary Awards (<http://womenwritingthewest.org/willaCurrentFinalists.html>), presented annually by Women Writing the West.

Marlene Samuels' book, *When Digital Isn't Real*, has been selected as a finalist in the reference category in Forward Reviews' summer issue. It has also been selected to be exhibited at the Frankfurt International Book Fair in October.

Kayann Short's book, *A Bushel's Worth: An Ecobiography*, a Sarton Memoir Award finalist, received terrific reviews in July from *Terrain.org: Journal of the Built + Natural Environment and Journal of Western American Literature*. Her essay, "Soil vs Dirt: A Reverie on Getting Down to Earth," will be published in Barbara Richardson's anthology *Dirt: A Love Story* by University of New England Press in 2015.

Jamuna Advani's memoir, *The Letter*, has just been published.



This membership is a gift.

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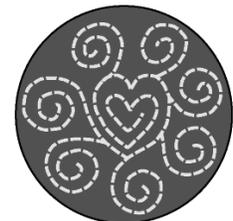
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- \$200 Contributor
- \$325 Patron
- \$125 Organizational Membership



Circles: The Heart of Story Circle Network

Mother-Daughter Circle

by Sharon Blumberg



Our Mother-Daughter members-only e-circle commenced last September of 2013. With the beginning of every month, a writing prompt is sent by the facilitator. Then mothers and daughters, either as a team or individually, respond with journal-writing reflections. Some may come in the form of poetry as well. We have many talented writers in this area.

Do you have a daughter age 11 to 18 who still lives at home and likes to write? Would you like to strengthen the bond between you and your daughter through shared writing experiences? If so, then you might want to consider our **Mother-Daughter** circle. For the cost of your national membership to SCN alone and using your personal log-in information provided by Story Circle Network, the two of you can participate.

Story Circle Network Board Member **Sharon Blumberg** serves as the facilitator for this group. The writing prompts vary, but all will be such that young girls and moms alike can relate in different ways. If you would like to join this circle with your daughter, please **contact Lee Ambrose at leesmuse2@gmail.com**. Place the words "Mother-Daughter" in the subject line of your email for easy identification. Mothers must be members of SCN; no member fees necessary for daughters; all communication will be handled through the mothers, via the YahooGroup for the circle. If you would like to join, please go **here**. We would love to feature selected writings from our monthly prompts to future SCN E-letters, for our members' reading pleasure.

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True Words: Looking Ahead

We're always looking for stories rich in evocative detail, showing the struggles, challenges, and resolutions of real people living real lives. We prefer that you submit your work directly to the website at:

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

Future Topics and deadlines for upcoming Journals:

- December, 2014 (due Oct 15)—OPEN TOPIC
- March, 2015 (due Jan 15)—OPEN TOPIC
- June, 2015 (due April 15)—Synchronicity

An SCN LifeWriting Retreat at Festival Hill: LifeLines with Linda Hasselstrom

Linda M. Hasselstrom returns to Texas to lead us in a Story Circle LifeWriting Retreat! Mark your calendars for May 14-17, 2015, and join us at the beautiful Festival Hill campus for this productive and inspiring event. Read the story on page 24, and visit the website at:

<http://www.storycircle.org/LifeLines/>

Upcoming Events!

Susan Albert will read and sign her new book, *The Darling Dahlias and the Silver Dollar Bush*, at BookWoman (5501 North Lamar #A-105, Austin, TX 78751 [east side of Lamar between North Loop and Koenig Lane]) on September 6 from 3:30-5:30pm. She will also say a few words about *A Wilder Rose*.

Jeanne Guy will lead a women's LifeWriting retreat, "Exploring and Reframing Our Inner Story," at the Marsh House Retreat Center, Whidbey Island, WA, on Oct 2-6. For details, more info and to register, go to: <http://www.jeanneguy.com/what-i-do/retreats/whidbey-island-2014/>. Early Bird Special: Sign up now and save \$300!

Nan Phifer will lead a seminar, "Writing Meaningful Memoirs," at the Silver Baron Lodge, 2900 Deer Valley Dr E, Park City, UT, on Oct 10-11. For details, more info and to register, go to: <http://www.eventbrite.com>