



# Story Circle Journal

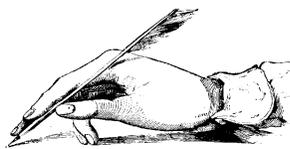
Volume 1 Number 3

A newsletter for women who have stories to

## SC Network Begins Developing Curriculum, Programs for 1997-98

by Susan Wittig Albert

*Storytelling is at the heart of life...In finding our own story, we assemble all the parts of ourselves. Whatever kind of mess we have made of it, we can somehow see the totality of who we are and recognize how our blunderings are related. We can own what we did and value who we are, not because of the outcome but because of the soul story that propelled us. —Marion Woodman*



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The twelve members of our board of directors have had a busy summer. We have been bringing the Story Circle to life—and as many of us know, birthing and mothering is *hard* work! (Can you imagine twelve moms, arguing about how their favorite children should be raised?) But our many projects aren't just ideas any longer. They are taking visible form, each with a different energy and excitement, and we're anxious to tell you about them.

Our first "official" program—a nine-hour intensive workshop on memoir writing—will be held in Austin TX on September 19-20. (We apologize for the short notice for those of you who live out of town. Our spring calendar will be available much earlier.) The workshop will be led by Susan Albert and Carol Abbassi, and will focus on three topics: Passionate Attachments, A Closet of Memories, and The Soul's Story. Carol is the leader of an Austin Story Circle and an experienced facilitator. Susan (that's me) is the author of *Writing From Life* and the editor of the *SCJ*. Registration information is available at 512-306-0964.

For the spring, our Program Workgroup is planning several different six-week courses on journaling and memoir writing, taught in Austin by

faculty of the Story Circle Network. We also expect to have 4-5 weekend workshops on various topics, a weekend retreat, an on-going Reader's Club, and a special event (we're hoping to have a talk by a well-known memoirist, with perhaps several associated workshops). The spring calendar (complete with dates and details) will be published in our November newsletter, so you'll have time to make your plans.

Nancy Blue is chairing our Public Relations/Public Education/Media Workgroup. The group has several important projects designed to enhance the Network's public visibility and reach out to other women's groups. In the works: a SCN Webpage, which is being designed for us by a team of University of Texas students under the energetic direction of Dr. Eleanor Jordan. (For those of you on-line, the SC Network now has a "temporary" home page, at <http://www.tstar.net/~china/circle.html>.)

Also under development, a Speaker's Bureau, a new logo, and improved newsletter design.

All of our projects have the immediate goal of helping women give voice to their life experiences, through memoir and journal writing and other forms of expression. Our organizational goal is to create the funds that will support a National Office for the Network, allow us to

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## Network Planning—*from Page 1*

offer an annual conference, and enable us expand our programs.

How can you be involved? You can continue to receive the newsletter, attend (if you can) our programs, and invite us to offer workshops, lectures, and special events in your local area. In fact, we are beginning to discuss how we might develop Network chapters in other cities, so that you can create your own local Network programs. If you're interested in this idea, please write and let us know.

We know babies don't grow up overnight, and we don't want to rush things. But we also know that the energy we devote to the SCN now will result in a

## The Story Circle Network

### The Story Circle Network—What is it and who are the members?

The Story Circle Network is made up of women who want to explore their lives by exploring their stories.

### What can you gain from the Network?

You will receive the following publications, information, and opportunities. These things won't be available all at once—we're just getting started! But as our membership grows, our activities will expand. You'll get:

- ◇ **four issues** of the 16- to 22-page newsletter, *Story Circle Journal*, with ideas for writing additional chapters of your life story, plus poetry and brief personal essays from subscribers
- ◇ **the opportunity to submit your writing** to the newsletter and other Network publications
- ◇ **a network guide** that will allow you to directly contact members with interests and experiences similar to yours (forthcoming, as the Network grows and members send us their information)
- ◇ **a list of Story Circles** across the country (forthcoming, as new Circles form)
- ◇ **book reviews and a resource guide** listing groups, teachers, and publications that are committed to helping women tell their stories (in each newsletter)
- ◇ **a calendar** of happenings and events related to women's storytelling (in each newsletter, as members submit information)

**What can you contribute to the**

### Network?

The Story Circle Network is built out of our shared experiences. To it, we hope you will bring your-self and your willingness to share your life and what you have learned from it. If you wish, you may contribute some of your writing (poetry, prose, book reviews—ask for a copy of our writer's guidelines). If you would like to be in contact with other subscribers, you may place your name in our Pen Pals and Writing Partners column. If you offer products or services that would be appropriate to the Network membership, you may wish to list them in the Resource Directory. If you are a teacher or group leader, you are invited to calendar your related events.

We also hope that many of you will decide to participate by leading a Story Circle in your community. It isn't hard, and it's enormously rewarding. Won't you give it a try?

### How do you become a member?

That's the easiest part! You automatically become a member of the Network when you subscribe to *Story Circle Journal*. Annual memberships are \$20 in the United States, \$26 in Canada and Mexico, and \$30 elsewhere. You will find a membership form at the back of this newsletter. Join us!



## Story Circle

STORY CIRCLE is a quarterly newsletter, published in February, May, August, and November. 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.

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Editor: Susan Wittig Albert  
Associate Editor: Carole Wood

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### Subscription Rates

*Four Issues \$20 US*  
*\$26 Canada & Mexico, \$30 elsewhere*

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



**Back Issues:** Back issues are available either as first-run or photocopies, for \$5.50 each (includes first class postage). Canada, Mexico, and elsewhere: \$8 each.

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

**Change of address:** If you move, please tell us. Unless you send us your new address, we can't guarantee that you'll receive your newsletter!

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Story Circle Network

## Seniors, Stories, and Spirituality

Seniors have plenty of stories to tell and a deep desire to make themselves heard, as two of our Story Circle Network directors have learned. Carol Abbassi and Sister Hannah O'Donoghue conducted a program for Third Age Catholics in Austin TX recently. The activity was organized by Story Circle member Mary Jane Marks. Kathy Giltinan, another SCer, also participated.

The day of story telling, creative activity, and prayer was part of the VAMP program, directed by Mary Jane Marks. VAMP stands for Vitally Active, Mature People. Twenty-six women and one man were present. Most members of the group were in their late sixties.

Carol Abbassi opened the day's activities by talking about women's need to tell their stories, both psychologically and spiritually, and the vital role that women's stories can play in the shaping of our culture. The group responded slowly at first but with increasing enthusiasm, by telling stories out of their own experience.

The story-telling was followed by an art experience, introduced by Kathy Giltinan. "We don't always have to put our stories into words," Kathy pointed out, and offered examples of the way art can be an expression of our personal histories. By this time,

the seniors needed very little urging. The session was a lively one, with participants making lots of contributions.

After lunch, Sister Hannah continued the program. Throughout the morning, she had made notes on the comments and contributions of various participants. She wove these observations into a discussion of the way our stories reflect our spiritual experiences, spiritual history, and deep spiritual beliefs. These are part of the unique spirituality of each individual person, she pointed out.

According to program organizer Mary Jane Marks, the response to the day's activities was very positive. "They want to do it again," she said. She feels that the three-part program—a general introduction to story-telling together with shared stories; an art section; and a section on spirituality—was a very good beginning. "It's a good model to start from," she commented. "I think when we present the program again, we'll get an even better response."

If you are conducting story programs for special audiences in your community, we would very much like to have a brief report. Just write or e-mail, telling us what you've done, who was involved, how it worked, and how the group responded. Be sure to include your name and phone number.

## What If You . . .

Wrote about your Brownie uniform and how much it meant to you?...

Wrote the universe a love letter, thanking her for the crazy, wonderful, challenging, weird opportunities she's handed you?...

Awarded yourself a "writing vacation," turned off the TV, and spent a week's worth of evenings writing another chapter in your life's story?...

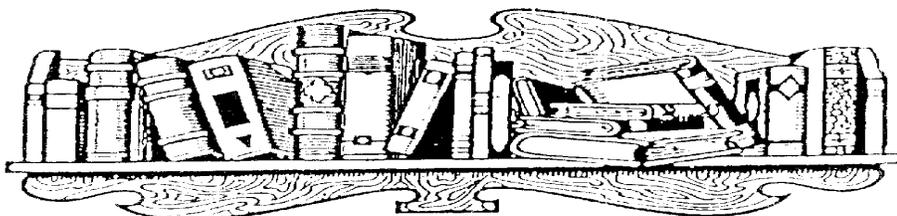
Believed that you were never offered a dream without also being given the means make it come true?...

Listed the five most exciting things you could think of to do—and then did them?....

Found a memoir by a woman whose life you hadn't yet explored, and took notes for your own life's journey while you read it?...

And when you were finished, what if you recommended the memoir to a friend, and compared notes?...

What if you took time to celebrate your journey? Here's one way: Light a candle, play a favorite piece of music, and remember yourself at 8. Then try 18, 28, 38, and so on. Write down what's new about you in each decade, what's carried over from decades before. What would you like to see happen in the *next* decade?



## Story Circle Plans September Workshop

*Ideas have come from the strangest places.—Joyce Carol Oates*

*It always comes down to the same necessity; go deep enough and there is a bedrock of truth, however hard.—May Sarton*

*To find in ourselves what makes life worth living is risky business, for it means that once we know, we must seek it. It also means that without it life will be valueless.—Marsha Sinetar*



Susan Albert and Carol Abbassi will conduct a women's story-telling workshop on September 19-20 in Austin TX. The nine-hour event will be held in the Hancock Building in the Lower Colorado River Authority complex, located at 3701 Lake Austin Blvd.

"This is the Story Circle's first 'official' program," Susan Albert said, announcing the workshop, "so we are anxious that it be a success." Proceeds from the event will be used to fund up-coming Story Circle activities, in Austin and elsewhere.

The workshop will be based on the techniques described in her book, *Writing From Life*, but the writing topics will be drawn from articles in recent issues of the *Story Circle Journal*, Albert said. The group will develop chapters for their memoirs based on the subjects of *Passionate Attachments*, *A Closet of Memories*, and *The Soul's Story*.

"Participants will learn why we must tell our stories and why personal narrative is a healing art," Albert said. "Our stories are sacred acts, powerful acts of self-expression and self-determination. Writing the stories of our past can help us define a healthy and rewarding future."

Albert has been teaching classes in life-writing for twenty-five years. Abbassi is the leader of two Austin Story Circles, and an experienced group facilitator. Both serve as directors of the Story Circle Network and participate in the development of its new curriculum.

The workshop program will begin with an introductory talk and writing session from 7-10 p.m. on Friday evening. Saturday's activities will be divided into two sessions, morning and afternoon. The sessions will get underway at 9 a.m. and end at 3 p.m. with an additional 45-minute session for women who are interested in facilitating Story Circles. Participants will have lunch on their own. There is plenty of parking in the LCRA lot, and several restaurants are located in the area.

The cost of the nine-hour program is \$75. It includes tuition, a signed copy of *Writing From Life*, and four issues of *The Story Circle Journal*. Checks for the full amount should be mailed to Story Circle Network, PO Drawer M, Bertram TX 78605. Enrollment is limited by the size of the meeting room, so early registration is encouraged.

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### Looking Ahead

Each issue of the *SCJ* is organized around a particular theme. We urge you to submit your brief essays, poetry, and book reviews on these themes, as well as your favorite women's quotations. But we also accept non-theme writing, so please share your story. Send for our Writers' Guidelines.

**November, 1997**—Gardens of the Imagination: Growing a Life (deadline 10/1/97)

**February, 1998**—Out of the Fire: From Devastation to New Growth (deadline 1/1/98)

**May, 1998**—Minding My Own Business: Writing about Work (deadline 4/1/98)

**August, 1998**—Life With Father (deadline 7/1/98)

# All the Way to Heaven: A Spiritual Journey

by Susan Wittig Albert

*Each issue, in these pages, Susan writes about life-writing. Her articles are designed to help you add chapters to your life story. They will usually take the form of the chapters of **Writing From Life**, offering ideas and topics for your writing, examples and clippings from the writing of other women, organizational suggestions, and ways to celebrate your creation. If you do all the exercises suggested here, you will have enough material to create one full chapter of your book—the story of your life, to which (we hope) you are continuing to add new chapters. So look into the closet of your imagination, pull out those memories, and start writing!*

## That Old Time Religion, It's Good Enough for Me



Growing up in a rural Illinois community, I was powerfully shaped by my mother's religion. Mother belonged (and still does, in her 90th year) to a church that we would now call fundamentalist. Back then, and at home, we just called it a "Bible-preaching" church. For most of the years of my childhood, I not only went to Sunday School and morning worship, but to the Sunday evening service and to the Wednesday evening prayer meeting. For a few years, my father was a part-time janitor at the church, so we also spent several hours on Saturday morning, cleaning the building and getting it ready for Sunday service.

I still remember, even more vividly than I remember the houses we lived in at that time, the earliest of the churches we attended. It was a small, plain brick building with one main room, dark wood pews, very smooth, on either side of a central aisle. In the front was a raised platform with doors on either side. The platform held a simple lectern with a Bible on it, where the preacher stood. (No woman ever stepped foot on that platform, not even my mother, when she was running the vacuum). At the back of the platform, a curtain concealed a recessed tank of water called a baptistry (the ritual of acceptance was an immersion ritual). The windows in the opposite walls of the room were made of diamond-shaped patterns of colored glass. They were different from windows in other churches because there were no images of Christ or the apostles—this church did not believe in worshipping "graven images," or any other images, for that matter. One of the doors beside the platform led to a small kitchen, where every week a group of soberly-dressed women with no makeup or jewelry would prepare the communion that was handed around by the men on Sunday morning, grapejuice in tiny individual cups that I longed to take home and play teaparty with, and a salty flat bread broken into small bits. (You could only take communion, I knew, after you had been immersed in the water, and if you had been good all week—one or the other of which sadly left me out most Sundays.) There was no organ or piano, because the church did not believe in musical accompaniment. The only instrument of worship was the human voice, and often my father led the singing, using a little round mouthharp with the notes printed on it to set the key.

Now, looking at the words I have just put down on paper, I am amazed. I had no idea I remembered all of that! Looking at the physical details that rose to the surface of my memory as I wrote, I am surprised to see how they embodied the tenants of that church's faith. I should have realized that, of course, for as an

*All the way to heaven is heaven. —  
Saint Theresa*

*Give me that old time religion,  
Give me that old time religion,  
Give me that old time religion,  
It's good enough for me.*

*It was good for Mother and Daddy,  
It was good for Mother and Daddy,  
It was good for Mother and Daddy,  
And it's good enough for me.*

*When I left home and faced the realities of the world, I put my thoughts of God in cold storage for awhile, because I couldn't reconcile what I believed, deep inside, with what was going on around me. But that early period, when God was as real as the wind that blew from the sea through the pine trees in the garden, left me with inner peace, which, as I grew older, swelled—until, perforce, I had to open my mind to God again—Jane Goodall*

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*The journey to God is merely the reawakening of the knowledge of where you are always, and what you are forever.—A Course in Miracles*

*The spiritual path represents the process of becoming whereby the soul remembers itself and the Self discovers its true identity as Spirit. Every spiritual tradition offers a map for the seeker. Each metaphorically depicts a journey of the soul from darkness to enlightenment, or from ignorance to knowledge. —Frances Vaughn*

*Writing your spiritual history gives you the opportunity to declare spiritual independence. You may choose to stay within a religious structure and use it to support and acknowledge your own path, or you may acknowledge the path beyond that structure and the freedom it has brought you. You bear witness to your spiritual experiences in whatever context they occur. You grant yourself the time to sort and take with you everything that was, is, or can be made good. And to make peace with, forgive, and leave behind everything that was harmful or limiting of spiritual growth.—Christina Baldwin*

*We can receive only what we already have! We can become only what we already are! We can learn only what we already know! It is a matter of realizing potentialities. It is not a matter of “adding to” but of “developing,” of “evolving.” We contain within ourselves a world of capacities, of possibilities, which the outer world summons forth, speaks to, releases.—M.C. Richards*

adult, I know that a physical place of worship symbolically presents that religious community’s spiritual beliefs. But I hadn’t thought of how that might apply to me, until I began to write. And looking back, I can see (with some surprise) how deeply impressed I must have been with the experience of religion, and how it shaped my sense of who I was, where and to whom I belonged, how I should or shouldn’t behave, what I should wear on my body and my face, what kind of language I should use. For better and for worse, my deepest and earliest (and probably most enduring) understanding of myself was as a participant in a formal religion, with all its rules, regulations, symbols, doctrines, practices. And I can’t understand my personal past—or my present, for that matter—if I don’t understand the religious and spiritual experiences that shaped me. This is true for you, as well. It is true for all of us.

Do you have childhood memories like this? Whether you come from a Christian tradition—or one that is Jewish, Moslem, Buddhist, Native American—can you look back in your imagination, open a door, and walk into the earliest place of worship? If you can, write down these memories of the physical place now, in as much detail as you can. And as the details emerge from your memory, see if you can connect them with beliefs. Here are a few brief examples from Story Circle workshops:

I remember the beautiful stained glass windows with pictures of the saints. I believed the windows must be something like heaven, and I knew the angels sounded just like our choir.

When we filed in, the women and children knelt on one side, the men on the other. Only the men ever spoke inside that room. I believed that women who spoke out loud would be damned.

Wednesday night testimony meeting was held in the church basement. We sat on wooden folding chairs, and people would stand up and say how bad they had been and how God took care of them, while everybody said Amen and Thank You Lord. Sometimes (the best times) it got kind of loud. On the wall there was a picture of Jesus holding a lamb. I believed I was like that lamb, and I could be bad and He would still take care of me.

Getting in touch with our religious beginnings is important to us because so much of our later history is written in these early days. Here are some questions you might ask yourself:

As a child, what did my parents teach me to believe about God?

What did they teach me about the Devil?

How were their beliefs formed? By their parents? By their church? By their community?

What scriptures did my family regard as holy? How seriously were these teachings taken? What happened to me if I violated any of the teachings or rules? How was I punished for my transgressions?

What religious rituals did my family observe? How were those rituals related to their beliefs?

What kind of role did women play in my family's religious tradition? Public role? Private role? How were women treated? What beliefs were held about women?

Were there any people who were implicitly or explicitly disbarred participation in the religious tradition of my family? Who was excluded?

To begin your chapter on your spiritual history, it might be helpful for you to write about your family's religious background and the way it has affected you. Before you start writing, though, it might be useful to read on, and see what other areas of your religious and spiritual history you will be exploring.

## *Religious...Spiritual...There's a difference?*

Yes! To see the difference in your own life, imagine this.

In the last few paragraphs, we've been thinking about *religious* experiences—spirit defined by (and confined to) the special terms and structures of a formal organization complete with holy writings, credentialed teachers, rules for membership, and approved ceremonies.

But Spirit does not live by human rule. Reflect again on your childhood. Were there times when you felt the presence of the Sacred outside your place of worship, when there were no priests, pastors, or rabbis around? What was that experience like? Here are a few examples:

I got lost in the woods when I was eleven, and I found this giant tree, very old. I'll never forget how I felt sitting next to that tree. I knew I was safe, and that she (not just the tree but all of nature) was there to take care of me and love me. —Erin P.

I was six or seven. I remember standing by the seashore, watching the waves move in and out and looking at the sunset. Everybody was way up on the beach having a picnic. Suddenly I had a sense of the infinity of the universe—those weren't my words then, but my feeling. And I felt that I was a flowing part of it, not separate in any way. It had given birth to me and I was *one* with it, and so was everybody else, even the heathen.—Heather H.

Do you see? Spirit is everywhere. It isn't mediated by any particular scripture or teacher, and we aren't required to be in a particular holy place to receive it. As children, we are often in closest touch with it in a natural setting, where we are strongly conscious of our relationship to All That Is. As children, our perception of the Sacred is often Feminine. We see God as birthing, nurturing, loving. While the God of our fathers might punish us for violating religious rules, the Sacred is somehow bigger than that, more inclusive, open to all.

*Gradually I am recognizing the meaning of my existence through my own myth.—Marion Woodman*

*The challenge, then, is to be the creative myth-maker that we are, to consciously choose our myth, lest it be chosen for us by the collective mind.—Mary Elizabeth Marlow*

*We get all the God we believe in.—Julianna McCarthy*

*My son called to me that God was inside his red fire engine. He wanted to show me. I did move as fast as I could, spilling like water through the kitchen door into a summer day, but God had left by the time I got there. My son smiled, told me I'd missed him by seconds.—Christina Baldwin*



*At the end of childhood, we are called to move out of immaturity into responsibility. If we do not make this passage, if we attach ourselves to our childhood home as a mollusk does to a sea rock, we do not mature....How do we find the courage to let go of what feels sure and safe and comfortable so that a new possibility can unfold? And how do we do this not just once, at the end of childhood, but many times throughout a lifetime, whenever old certainties need to be released, or perhaps abandoned entirely...?*  
—Sherry Ruth Anderson & Patricia Hopkins, *The Feminine Face of God*

*“Mystery doesn’t mean only some grand, ecstatic thing,” one woman told us as she was leaving the spiritual community in which she had lived for many years. “It means stumbling around in the darkness, terrified that nothing will be there if you don’t call on God in the old way. Once I knew what my life was consecrated to and what my direction was. Now I don’t know, and I don’t even know where to look.”*—Sherry Ruth Anderson & Patricia Hopkins, *The Feminine Face of God*

## Leaving My Father’s House

While the God of our fathers and mothers is of crucial importance in the development of our concept of spirit, that God may not be the God of the rest of our lives. Most of us go through several different stages of what some people think of as our “faith journey.” The first stage of that journey is our acceptance of our parents’ religious beliefs as our own, as an integral and unquestioned part of our personal identity. Growing up, however, involves the questioning of many of our beliefs about the way the world works. Growing up may involve leaving the faith of our fathers, as well as leaving our fathers’ houses.

Because this is such an important part of our journey, we need to document it. If leaving your family’s religious tradition is an important part of your spiritual history, write about it: when, why, how it felt. This is what a few women have written:

I didn’t leave in a big huff. When I went away to college, somehow none of that stuff seemed relevant anymore. It was just a little piece of life, pretending to be everything. My folks were terribly hurt, and it created a huge rift between us. But all those rules about what to eat and what words to say—it just didn’t seem necessary any longer.—  
Jane M.

Leaving the Church was like cutting off my arms. It hurt. But I wanted to marry Charlie and he was divorced and the priest said I would be living in sin. I couldn’t reconcile the way I loved Charlie and the way I was supposed to believe, so I stopped believing.—  
Laura K.

The whole thing just seemed so hypocritical to me. My father would go to church twice on Sunday and abuse my mother and us the rest of the week, especially when he got drunk on Saturday. The preacher got in trouble for fooling around with the church secretary. Was this what God was all about? I didn’t think so.—Ruth J.

Leaving the faith of our family can often inflict traumatic wounds. At the least, it might mean that we no longer share important rituals:

I didn’t go home for Yom Kippur. That’s what hurt the most, thinking of my mom, and the candles, and the table, where they all were. But I felt that I couldn’t share that without being pulled back in to share the rest of it.—Rachel R.

At the worst, it might mean that we no longer *have* a family:

When I married Lev and decided to convert to Judaism, my dad disowned me. If it had been up to my mom, I could have still been a part of the family, but he was adamant. “If she can’t come to church like a Christian and raise the kids right, she’s no daughter of mine.” That’s exactly what he said. I’ll never forget it. And I couldn’t go home until after he died.—Jeannie A.

Leaving the faith of our families may occur when we trade it for another religious tradition, as in Jeannie's case. If that has been true for you, perhaps you were "adopted" by another family, another religion. Jeannie goes on to say this:

Even if it meant losing my family, I felt I did the right thing. Lev's family was a lot closer, a lot more loving, and they took me in. And I felt more at home in the synagogue, somehow, than in my parents' church. For the kids, it was definitely right.—Jeannie A.

But when we give up one religion, we don't always choose another: For a long time after I left my mother's fundamentalist church, I was agnostic, choosing to reserve belief in any sacred being. Others become atheists:

I had no spiritual life after that for a long while. If I couldn't believe in their God, why bother? I filled up my life with my career, my family, my house. I didn't need anything else.—Polly B

What has been your experience? Here are some questions that might help you to describe it:

How is my present religious affiliation different from my parents?  
How is my present spiritual life different from theirs?

How did the change come about? Was it a long process or short?  
Easy or difficult? Painless or painful?

Writing about the separation may not be easy. As Patricia Lynn Reilly points out in her book, *A God Who Looks Like Me: Discovering A Woman-Affirming Spirituality*, opening the closed doors of our religious past can be painful. But if the doors remain closed, we can't learn from the experience. It is a necessary pain. We cannot claim our courage and power without acknowledging the strategies we took to begin to make changes.

## *A Faith of My Own*

Accepting a faith of our own—discovering a spirituality that affirms our deepest self—usually involves some sort of spiritual renewal: awakening to our own concept of a Higher Power, imagining the God of our understanding, and creating a spiritual practice that helps us to deepen our faith. Here is how one workshop participant describes her faith:

I imagine a Mother-God, guiding and supporting me, not the Big Boss, but gentle and loving. I attend a church in order to participate in their community outreach programs, but when we pray or sing I translate God-he to God-she, and I am working to get the church to change its liturgy. I practice daily meditation, and I spend part of every day in my garden, where I feel closest to Her. I imagine that She leaves traces of Herself in every person, and I look for them.—Martha W.

*Spiritual growth is not made in reaction against, for all striving against imposed restrictions is imaginary. Spiritual growth is accomplished by inclination toward. We grow like the sunflower, following the light.—Joy Houghton*

*Throughout childhood and adolescence, like many women, I had been told that there was a God-shaped space within my soul and that I would not be satisfied until it was filled with the male God of my childhood. Yet as hard as I tried, the male God would not fit. I felt that this was my problem, that there was something flawed about me. So I twisted myself out of shape and he still didn't fit. It wasn't until I encountered the feminine face of God that I realized that there was nothing wrong with me. As I descended into the wealth of my own life, I discovered that she had been there all the time. Her presence restored me to a loving relationship with myself.—Patricia Lynn Reilly, *A God Who Looks Like Me: Discovering A Woman-Affirming Spirituality**

*Illumination grows within us, sometimes like a swift mutation, sometimes like the yellowing aura of spring. But most readily it comes if we give up all that we have in order to be open-souled when it comes. That it may take its shape in us.—M.C. Richards*

*I found God in myself, and I loved her fiercely—Ntozake Shange*

*Our [spiritual] practice, whatever it is, is our teacher. Life is our practice. If we listen deeply to what's going on—if we're involved down to the very bottom with our life situation—this is our true teacher, the most venerable teacher. Life-roshi!—Maurine Stuart, Roshi*

*The familiar life horizon has been outgrown: the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand.—Joseph Campbell*

*The life that awaits us has no blueprint. —M.C. Richards*

For many woman, reclaiming a personal, individual faith is not an easy task, because it involves not only learning a new way to see the Sacred, but forgiving past hurts and accepting old wounds. As one woman wrote:

To have my own spirituality, I had to realize that all those things my father did in God's name had nothing to do with God. Once I got past that, I was on my way to being healed.—Wendy M.

Sometimes it involves accepting something in our present that seems utterly unacceptable. Author Nancy Mairs, living with multiple sclerosis, writes in *Ordinary Time: Cycles in Marriage, Faith, and Renewal*, about an experience in church:

I knelt...and began the interior jumble that forms my post-communion meditation...I just wanted to get rid of the damned disease. "God, God, God," I prayed, "please, heal me!" And then, for the first and only time in my life, I got a response. I'd never heard voices, and I didn't hear one now. Three monosyllables simply materialized in my consciousness: "But I am."

Yes. Many of us, in the midst of our despair and dis-ease, are being healed. The trick, as Nancy Mairs shows us, is to learn that our despair and disease are our teachers in this spiritual life, and that what hurts is often (always?) our healer. And as St. Theresa has said, it is not the goal that matters, it is the journey itself: "All the way to heaven is heaven."

So—where are you in your journey? Here are a few questions that may help you to describe your spiritual life:

Who are your saints, holy people, teachers?  
 What are your scriptures?  
 What holy days do you celebrate?  
 Who belongs to your spiritual community?  
 What are your names for the Sacred?  
 What are the images you use to imagine the Sacred?

To conclude your chapter on your spiritual journey, you might want to write a

## Pen Partners & Round Robins

*If you are looking for a pen partner with whom to share stories, we invite you to send your name, address, and a paragraph about your interests and we will print it in this regular column. Please address Pen Partners. If you would like to participate in "Stories in the Round," a round-robin story-sharing project that may involve up to five people, let us know and we will forward your letter to a round robin coordinator.*

## Some Soul Stories For You To Read

*A woman's soul story isn't always labeled "religious history" or even "spiritual journey." In fact, the story of the soul's evolution is often told in the form of another journey, in the guise of different kinds of knowing. These stories are often beautifully oblique, delicately told. But they are stories of enlightenment, of moving out of an inner dark to a new kind of knowing, of freeing the self from bonds of conventions, rules, and order imposed by somebody else to a new, personal Rule. Here are some books of spiritual journeys that will show you some of the many different paths the soul can take toward the light.*

**Ordinary Time: Cycles in Marriage, Faith, and Renewal**, by Nancy Mairs. An unusual spiritual autobiography told in Mairs' direct and unflinchingly honest voice. This is a book about the messy business of being a woman in a real world in which illness, infidelity, anger, and despair are steps on the way to growing the soul.

**Meetings with Remarkable Women: Buddhist Teachers in America**, by Lenore Friedman. This book brings us interviews with seventeen women who have taken the Buddhist path. As a group, their stories tell us a great deal about women's contributions to the changing soul of American Buddhism. Individually, each story describes a way—often a painful way—to truth.

**Swimming the Channel: A Memoir of Love, Loss and Healing**, by Sally Friedman. Swimming the English Channel isn't just a physical act or an heroic dream, it is a spiritual journey. For the author, who lost her husband on the eve of her planned swim, it was also a way of learning who she was, all alone.

**Long Quiet Highway: Waking Up In America**, by Natalie Goldberg. If you haven't read this yet, drop what you're doing and begin. It is a book about choice and change and being one's own woman under a relentless pressure to be somebody else. It might also be subtitled "Writing as a Prayer of the Soul."

**Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest**, by Carol Christ. A collection of essays by women from different religious traditions that help us understand more fully our own search for the divine.

**Knowing Woman: A Feminine Psychology**, by Irene Claremont de Castillejo. I met this Jung-centered book in a class on women's spirituality. It helped me form a new and clearer sense of the relationship between Self and the divine.

**The Interior Castle**, by Teresa of Avila. A Catholic woman's journey through the houses of the soul, often painful, always searching. A classic spiritual journey.

**Centering: In Pottery, Poetry, and the Person**, by M. C. Richards. This is not strictly a memoir, although there is much of the personal in these essays. What I learned from Richards' book is that the spiritual is rooted in the daily sacraments of making and doing

**A Country Year: Living the Questions**, by Sue Hubbell. If you want to see how a woman pursues her spiritual journey alone (mostly) in the woods (the Ozark Mountains), this is a fine book. It will not answer all your questions, but it might help you figure out what to ask.

**Plain and Simple**, by Sue Bender. This quiet little book gives us a fascinating glimpse into the practical spirituality of the Amish, but it also shows the effect of Bender's inquiry on her own spiritual life. Seeking directions from Amish passersby on her way to town one day, Bender asks, "Am I on the right road?" It is a question we all need to ask.

**Talking to High Monks in the Snow**, Lydia Minatoya. Montoya, a Japanese-American, travels to Asia after she is fired from her teaching job. The journey becomes a spiritual odyssey, as she encounters grace, spirits, and herself. "Taking detours, I pause here and there to sample the hospitality of strangers. Wondering, is this where I belong? But I always return to my road, wanting to find home, before the darkness falls."

**Spiritual Narratives**, ed. by Sue Houchins. This is a collection of four powerful 19th-century African-American women: Maria Stewart, Jarena Lee, Julia Foote, and Virginia Broughton. Each narrative shows how spirit can embody itself in the passionate commitment to speak out against injustice, and how that commitment, in itself, can be a spiritual quest.

## True Words from Real Women

*In this section of each Story Circle Journal, we publish your contributions of poetry and prose, published or unpublished. Write for our Writers' Guidelines, limber up your pen (or your computer), and send in your submissions. We want to hear your story!*

### Dreaming

My blind  
 beating nightwings  
 unfold, unfurl  
 in the gravid darkness dense  
 with nascent possibility.  
 They pound and strain  
 against the weight of the night air pressing down.  
 The muscles of my back are tight and I cannot lift up in flight,  
 heavy as I am and unwieldy with this birth.  
 I shall have to remain here,  
 pinned  
 upon the earth in my primal form,  
 tangled in my cocoon  
 as my wings  
 struggle forth  
 and relentlessly beat me  
 into awareness, into someone  
 wild and undaunted,  
 fiercely fighting free.

Joy Gates  
 Ashville NC

### Spiritual Journey

All the way to heaven is heaven  
 Theresa said.  
 The words lit the landscape  
 like a flashing beacon on a dark night.  
 I had always assumed  
 (had always been taught) that heaven  
 was something that happened  
 at the end.

Now I know  
 better.

Susan Albert  
 Bertram TX

### Soul Mates

Grandfather discovered  
 At a very early age, he was white, all white.  
 White skin, white hair, white teeth,  
 White-on-white eyes.  
 Even his heart was white, for it pumped white blood.  
 His brain, his lungs, his liver, his spleen, all  
 All pristine white.

He marveled at his dazzling whiteness,  
 So proud, he refused even to cast a shadow.  
 And he slept, wrapped in an all-white quilt,  
 Dreaming of crystal white worlds.  
 In time his purity became his fame,  
 And his life's work was telling others  
 How to be finally, perfectly lily white.  
 Like himself.

To be noted is the fact that the woman he married  
 Was all-black. Black skin, black hair,  
 Black teeth, black-on-black eyes.  
 Her shadow cast itself from her heels  
 Straight back to the Garden of Eden.

In the end they were buried in matching coffins,  
 One white, one black. General opinion being  
 His last breath was saintly white.  
 Their daughter was there, an all-white woman  
 And her husband, an all-black man.  
 And on, and on, and on.  
 But she sleeps wrapped in an all-white quilt,  
 Dreaming of inky black worlds.

Eve Melton  
 Palo Alto CA



## Books for the Journey



*In each issue, we'll review one or more books that teach us something important about women's stories. Some will be related to the theme of the issue, others will simply be books we couldn't resist. If you would like to contribute, write for our Reviewers Guide.—Susan Albert*

**List Your Self: Listmaking as the Way to Self-Discovery**, by Ilene Segalove and Paul Bob Velick. (Andrews and McMeel Publishers, ISBN 0-8362-2179-6, \$14.95)

When I teach life-writing classes and workshops, we also spend some part of our time making a list. Sometimes we write more than one list—lists of all the places we've lived, lists of teachers (or books!) that changed our lives, lists of friends, lists of remembered music that holds memories. We write lists not only to be sure that we are getting down what we want to remember, but because making the list is therapeutic, all by itself. As Segalove and Velick say in **List Your Self**,

Listmaking gives us the tools for being seen. Listmaking gives us the strategy for being heard. Listmaking is the road from unknowing to knowing . . . Memories deep in your consciousness will emerge to fill in the blanks.

The last sentence, I think, tells us what is so important about listmaking, and how it is related to the act of telling our stories. Lists help us to open the treasure-trove of the unconscious where memories are stored away, to lift out pieces of the past that we have totally forgotten, and to savor them once more. I like this book (which is essentially a list of lists, with blank pages for you to write on) because it reminds me of the thousands of lists I haven't made yet—lists that might be essential in helping me reconstruct the story of my life. If your memories are slow in surfacing and you want to help them along, this book is an excellent tool.



**Nothing to Do but Stay: My Pioneer Mother**, by Carrie Young. (Delta Books, ISBN 0-385-31365-9, \$9.95)

It often happens that our own stories are intimately entwined with someone else's story, and that to understand who we are, we have to tell another person's story first. I suspect that this is true for Carrie Young, who has written a marvelous memoir of her mother. This warm, hopeful testament to a woman's courage tells the story of Carrine Gafjken, who—all alone, and with the single-minded, strong-hearted independence that is often obscured in men's stories about women—homesteaded 160 acres of North Dakota prairie. That was in 1904, and Carrine Gafjken spent the next eight years working for money in the winter and returning to her homestead in the summer. By the time she was thirty, she owned 320 acres of productive land. In 1912 she married Sever Berg. They sold his homestead and took up residence on hers, and over the next

*Don't be fooled by the overwhelming feeling that some things are just too much, too heavy, too personal, too sacred to be listed. These are the Ultimate Lists, the ones you've prepared for. These are the ones you want to really engage in. These are the lists that crack the code and give entry into the stuff we're made of, like "List all the people who love you for who you really are" or "List the things you'd like to be remembered for when you die," or "List all the ways you've helped others." See, you've thought about this stuff now. You're accountable. You have listened deeply and discovered more than you ever imagined. Pat yourself on the back: Good work. Or, of course, fill in "List all the reasons you should congratulate and celebrate yourself."—Segalove and Velick*

*Life can't ever really defeat a writer who is in love with writing, for life itself is a writer's lover until death—fascinating, cruel, lascivious, warm, cold, treacherous, constant.*  
—Edna Ferber

## *Books for the Journey—*from page 13

*The one thing a writer has to have is a pencil and some paper. That's enough, so long as she knows that she and she alone is in charge of that pencil, and responsible, she and she alone, for what it writes on that paper—Ursula K. LeGuin*

*Deliver me from writers who say the way they live doesn't matter. I'm not sure a bad person can write a good book. If art doesn't make us better, then what on earth is it for?—Alice Walker.*

*What discoveries I've made in the course of writing stories, all begin with the particular, never the general.—Eudora Welty*

*I have a sense of these buried lives striving to come out through me to express themselves.—Marge Piercy*

*Let the beauty you love be what you do. There are a hundred ways to kneel and kiss the ground.—Rumi*

decade she bore six healthy children, the last of whom has told us her story in a style that is as strong, clear, and direct as Carrine herself. This is a story with no frills or fancy lace, a story of hard work and tough times, but through it all runs hope and love for the land and a firm belief that perseverance will win out in the end.

As a memoirist yourself, you will learn several things from Carrie Young's splendid little book, besides the rich detail of women's lives on the northern prairies in the early years of this century. You will see how a daughter can tell her mother's story without sentimentalizing it. You will learn how to *show* women (and men) being heroic, not by describing them as heroes but by detailing the daily work of their lives. And you will find out how to shape little fragments of a mother-daughter relationship (like the chapter called "The Last Turkey") into a collection of stories. You may also learn something about style: Carrie Young writes simply and cleanly, telling a bare, spare story without ornament. Take, for instance, this small story.

My mother spent every Monday from dawn until late afternoon doing the family wash. It was probably no accident that four out of six of her children were born on Tuesday.

If she wasn't having a baby on Tuesday, my mother ironed. She had three flatirons, which she heated on top of her kitchen range and which she lifted with a detachable handle. She changed irons about every ten minutes as they cooled off. When I awakened on Tuesday morning, I could hear my mother ironing. The handle squeaked as it was pushed against the flatiron moving across the ironing board. One Christmas my father bought her an outsized gasoline iron, which was equipped with a small gas tank on the back; it had to be generated like a gas lamp before being lit. My mother loved that iron. It had such a large smooth surface, and she didn't have to heat up the coal range as she did with her old flatirons. But all day the carbon monoxide fumes drifted up in her face, and by the end of the day she had a splitting headache. Still, she refused to give it up; she thought the headaches were worth the time it saved. One Tuesday, however, she was in a hurry, and she didn't generate the iron long enough. It started to puff, and she hurled it out the kitchen door a second before it burst into flames. It couldn't have happened to a nicer piece of equipment.

If that isn't a story about sheer, indominatable *courage*, I don't know what is. To my mind, the best books are like this one, valuable in ways too many to count. I not only learned important things about life on the Dakota prairie, but I learned some very good ways to tell a story, to give voice to someone who can no longer speak for herself and who must live—if she continues to live—chiefly in the words of a writer and the heart of a reader. Carrie Young is a fine teacher for any aspiring writer, and her mother's life is an instructive example of storytelling at its best.



## A Story Circle News Roundup

*Story Circles come in all sizes, from an intimate and informal gathering of friends over coffee and notebooks to the larger, more formal organization of a class. Whether your Story Circle is large or small, we would love to hear from you. Drop us a note and tell us where you're located, what you are doing, and what you have learned from your Story Circle work.*

*On a recent trip to Oakmont, PA, Susan Albert had dinner with five Story Circle members from the Circle at Mystery Lovers Bookshop. Susan says:*

**"The thing that struck me most** about this wonderful group was the deep friendship that had developed among them. The group's facilitator, Mary Alice Gorman, mentioned to me that the women had been strangers before the group began in the spring, but at dinner, they were sharing dreams and disappointments and intimate details about their lives as if they had been sisters all their lives. I was reminded once more of the beauty of sharing our women's stories—stories of love and loss and achievement and awakening—and that we are drawn very close to those who care enough to *listen us* into being."

*Contact Mary Alice Gorman at Mystery Lovers Bookshop, 514 Allegheny River Blvd, Oakmont PA 15139 if you are interested in joining a Circle this fall. If she's not leading it, she may know who is.*



*Linda Hutton, of Decatur, IL, founder of Women in the Arts, writes to say that she will be leading a Story Circle in a location provided by the Decatur Park District. Linda is an active teacher, writer, and self-publisher. You can reach her at Hutton Publications, PO Box 2907, Decatur IL 62524.*

*For the past few months, Carol Abbassi has been facilitating two Story Circles in Austin, TX. Each group was made up of eight participants, who met for ten weeks at Carol's house, two hours a week, for reading, writing, and sharing. Participants have been reading and responding to the chapters in Writing From Life, but Carol wrote her own "lesson plans" for the group sessions. "The chapter on Gifts, Graces, and Glories was the easiest to work with," she reports, "while the chapter on the Valley of Shadows was the most difficult. It's hard to go into the dark."*

*According to Kathy Giltinan, a participant in one of Carol's Circles: "Discovering inner peace takes the healing power of telling and hearing powerful truths. Story Circles are the intimate community where we begin the telling and the healing." Thanks, Kathy!*

*Carol will be leading a workshop with Susan Albert in September and would like to lead other Circles in Austin this fall. Call her at 512-306-0933.*



**Remember!** *If you would like to create Story Circle activities in your area, we'd be glad to give you ideas and suggestions, or help you organize a program. Contact us with your name, address, and phone number, please.*

### Fall Schedule

In the next few months, Susan Albert will be appearing at the following locations. Since her new China Bayles mystery, *Love Lies Bleeding*, will be released in late October, many of these speaking appearances are at mystery bookstores. She will be glad to discuss *Writing From Life*, however, or meet with people who are interested in establishing a Story Circle. Phone 512-355-2799 to see if it's possible to connect while she is in the area.

- Sept. 19-20**, Story Circle Writing From Life Workshop, Austin TX, 512-306-0964
- Oct. 3-4**, Southern Festival of Books, Nashville TN
- Oct. 17-18** (tentative) Story Circle Writing from Life Workshop, Austin TX, 512-306-0964
- Oct. 20**, The Raven, Lawrence KS 913-749-3300
- Oct. 21**, Booked for Murder, Madison WI 1-800-200-5996
- Oct. 23**, Deadly Passions, Kalamazoo MI 1-800-643-6737
- Oct. 24-26**, Magna Cum Murder, Muncie IN
- Nov. 1**, Texas Book Festival, Austin TX
- Nov. 8**, Mystery Book Store, Dallas TX 214-265-7057
- Nov. 9**, Mysteries & More, Austin TX 512-837-6768
- Nov. 15**, Murder by the Book, Houston TX 713-524-8597
- Nov. 16**, Remember the Alibi, San Antonio TX 210-366-BOOK
- Nov. 22**, Borders Books, Austin TX 512-795-8410
- Dec. 5**, Texas Christian University, TCU Press Autograph Extravaganza, 817-921-7822



## Our Readers Share Their Stories....



### Jennifer Vann, New Orleans LA

I will shortly be leaving my work (18 years as a nurse). I have been working with long-term care patients, helping them write journals. Now I am using the idea of “thematic” memoir to help them recreate their life stories. When I have more time, I am looking forward to leading Story Circles. What a wonderful way to connect with yourself and others!

### Ann Wilson, Sacramento CA

I have been writing “morning pages” for three years. Now I have something special (to me) to write about. Thank you for *The Story Circle Journal*. It’s full of terrific ideas.

### Carolyn Ford, Boston MA

Earlier this year, I underwent major surgery. It has taken a chunk out of my life and my career—but it also gave me something incredibly important, time to look inside. The writing I’ve been doing since I started working with *Writing From Life* has changed me. Now I know where I’ve been, and I have a better sense of where I’m going.

### Dorothy Daniel, Houston TX

Have you read *Reviving Ophelia*, by Mary Pipher? It is a bestselling book that tells how girls lose their sense of individuality and self-esteem when they

reach puberty. The author says that when she wrote a poem in the eighth grade, her teacher wrote “Trite” across the page, and she did not write anything for another twenty years. That was me, too! I grew up thinking I couldn’t write. Now I’m determined to write my story, so that my daughters and granddaughter will know what it was like to grow up handicapped by others’ careless words.

### Theresa Keen, NYC

Wow. I just finished reading *Fierce Attachments*, by Vivian Gornick, which I read about in *Writing From Life*. I have had difficulty releasing myself from my mother’s control all through my entire life. There are places in Gornick’s book where I almost think it is me, not in the details, but in the way she felt. Reading her story has helped me understand my own. What a gift.

### Doris Jennings, San Diego

I care for my elderly mother. Telling her story into the tape recorder is keeping her mind alive. Her stories of the past warm her childrens’ hearts.

### Lorraine Brooks, Dallas TX

I home-school my two daughters, so it’s hard to find time for my own writing. But now we have a “unit” on Life Story. Both girls are keeping a journal, and we are

writing a family history, using stories told to the girls by their grandparents, aunts, and uncles. I hope that the journal writing will make them think more seriously about who they are, and that the family history will help them see where they came from and how they belong. And while they are writing, I am working on my own memoir. Every day, we share some of our writing, so I guess you can say that we have our own private Story Circle. Thanks for the *SC Journal*. I’m really enjoying it.

### Mary Jane Marks, Austin TX

Mary Jane writes that she’s been working with her granddaughter in a Story Circle for Two via e-mail. Mary Jane writes stories about her life, and granddaughter, in return, writes her own—although she worries about her spelling. A great idea, Mary Jane! Sharing our stories does indeed pull generations together.

### We Haven’t Heard Your Story!

We’d like to hear how life-writing is changing the way you see your past, your present, or your future. Please share your ideas, favorite books, experiments, suggestions, and etc.

This membership is a gift.  
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