

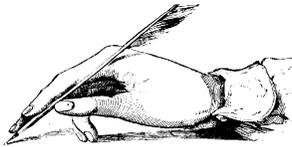


# Story Circle Journal

A newsletter for women who have stories to

## Opening our Lives, Sharing our Stories

by *Susan Wittig Albert*



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Welcome to *Story Circle Journal*, a newsletter—and more—for women who have stories to tell! We hope you enjoy it.

What is the *Story Circle Journal* all about? It's about stories, of course. Our stories. Women's stories. True stories, twice-told tales, comedies, tragedies, soap-operas, sagas, lost-and-found stories, true crime, true confessions—the weird and wonderful stories of our lives as women. The purpose of the *Story Circle Journal* is to help you write your story and tell part of it, and to give the rest of us the chance to hear you. Such a deal!

But we tell our stories, bit by bit, all the time, every day, don't we? We put our lives into words for our friends, our parents, our lovers, our children. Why do we need a newsletter?

Yes, women are born storytellers. But our oral stories last only as long as the breath it takes to tell them. As I have said in *Writing From Life*, we need to *write* our lives, to entrust them to the permanency of paper. And, as we are writing our stories, we need to share them.

The need to write our stories is

clear and compelling, it seems to me. In writing, we become more reflective, more deeply aware of meanings that were obscured by the chaos and excitement of lived experience. In writing, as Anaïs Nin says, we “taste life twice.” The second time around our experience is richer and more intense. What's more, we can reread and reconsider our written stories, revising our interpretations of each event as we better understand

*“We write to taste life twice, in the moment, and in retrospection...We write to be able to transcend our life, to reach beyond it. We write to teach ourselves to speak with others, to record the journey into the labyrinth.”—Anaïs Nin*

how it influenced us. “It's never too late—in fiction or in life—to revise,” says Nancy Thayer. And as we write and rewrite our life stories, we also revise our lives, learning more about the complicated, complex human beings we are. In fact, psychologists tell us that an essential part of the maturation process is learning how to revise ourselves, using the knowledge that we gain from our experiences.

But writing is a lonely business. Without encouragement, many women (Continued from Page 1) find the going too difficult to make

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# 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. The Network is just getting underway and invites you to become a charter member.



## 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 them)

## 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 yourself 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.

## How do you become a member?



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.

Edited by Susan Wittig Albert



## Subscription Rates

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**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!

## Opening our Lives, Sharing our Stories

the journey alone. That's one reason why I urge writers to form Story Circles in their communities—to help them set a writing plan and stay with it, even if it's only a couple of pages a day. Many writers credit their writer's groups with helping them stick to their goals. The combined resources are helpful, the collective energies invigorating, the generously shared dreams inspiring.

But not everybody can (or wants to) join a Story Circle—and that's where we come in. If you are a solitary writer, the Story Circle network can help you stick with your writing goals, give you some sisterly encouragement when you need it, and remind you that you are not alone on the journey! And because the network is more than just the *Story Circle Journal*, it can help you discover important resources that you may not be able to find for yourself, as well as charging you with new energy and

opening your heart to new dreams.

While these things are important, however, the need to share our stories grows from an even greater imperative. As I've said in *Writing From Life*, women's stories must be told, our wisdom and experience shared. Living in silence, keeping our stories to ourselves, we become their prisoners. Sharing our lives with others, we open the door to our collective prisons in a culture that has for centuries shut us up. As I listen to other women, as I read their lives, the shadowy corners of my own life become brighter. I am no longer in the dark. I am no longer a prisoner of my self.

I am deeply excited by the possibilities. Seeing ourselves as the authors of our own stories, discovering that we are all living the *same* story—these are only some of the benefits you'll gain by participating in this new network. Join us!



*For me, writing something down is the only way out.—Anne Tyler*

*We are, each of us, our own prisoner. We are locked up in our own story.—Maxine Kumin*

*It is not the quality of the love, or even the quantity of the love; it is the consistency of the loving that makes the difference.—Peg Armstrong*

*A disgruntled dreamer is a risky mentor.—Sarah Ban Breathnach*

*Love the moment, and the energy of that moment will spread beyond all boundaries.—Corita Kent*

## In the Works

Each issue of the *Story Circle Journal* is organized around a particular theme. We encourage you to submit your brief essays, poetry, and reviews on these themes. We are also looking for brief theme-related quotations (your own or borrowed from your favorite authors—include the author's name and the name of the work). These are our publication dates: February 1 (Spring), June 1 (Summer), September 1 (Autumn), December 1 (Winter). Write for writers' guidelines.

**Summer, 1997** — *A Closet of Memories* (Deadline April 1, 1997) What clothes open the closet of your heart? What stories do your dresses, suits, formals, favorite sweats and even your nighties(!) have to tell?

**Autumn, 1997** — *The Soul's Story* (Deadline: July 1, 1997) What is your spiritual history? What landmarks have you passed along your spiritual path? Who have been your spiritual companions, your soul's mentors?

**Winter, 1997** — *Gardens of the Imagination* (Deadline: October 1, 1997) What gardens have you tended during your life? What have they meant to you? What have you learned from them? How have your gardens helped you to grow?



*What makes someone a writer? Writers write. Creative writers write and cultivate creativity. The urge to tell a story or shape a poem is a calling. To act on the urge is to answer that calling.—Bonni Goldberg*

# Passionate Attachments

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 same form as 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.

## A History of the Heart



It's time to open a new chapter in our soul's story.

Take a blank sheet of paper, set a timer, and spend the next three minutes making a list of all the things you feel passionately about right now. Don't try to rank or prioritize the items or put them in any special order, just set them down as they occur to you, all the things you care about deeply. Don't worry that some of your passions seem trivial, or even silly. If you care, it's *important*. And if something else occurs to you when you're reading this, just add it. We're not following any hard-and-fast rules here.

I did this just now, and here's my list, as the items occurred to me.

*"Nothing is interesting if your not interested."*—Helen MacInness

*Bill and the kids and Mom  
writing & teaching  
my herb gardens and the things I make from herbs  
reading women's stories  
Meadow Knoll & our house  
our dog, the cats, the ducks, the goose, the wild birds*

*"If the bread of life is love and the salt of life is work, passion is the fire of life."*—Geraldine Pape

Looking at my list, I can see that some of my particular passions are the people in my life—my husband Bill, with whom I recently celebrated our tenth anniversary, and who is also my writing and business partner; my three grown children and their kids; my elderly mother, who lives in a nursing home a few miles away from us, close enough to visit every day. But I also care passionately about the animal companions who share our home: the compulsively affectionate black Lab named Zach whom we rescued from an animal shelter; the large, lazy Siamese cat and the tiny white cat who rarely lets me lay a hand on him; the duck sisters, Quakker Oats and Creamy Wheat, and Mama Superior, the Toulouse goose with a keel so heavy it drags the ground when she walks; the wild birds I watch from my window when I'm supposed to be writing.

And of course, there is MeadowKnoll, our five acres of meadow and woods in the Hill Country of central Texas, and the small house we live in, a pretty gray cottage with blue shutters, surrounded by herb gardens. And beyond the gardens are the woods and the creek and the meadow, where yesterday I saw a dozen wild turkeys searching for food in the winter grass, and a great blue heron with a gracefully curved neck and long, long legs, fishing along the margin of the creek. Living in the country is often inconvenient—Austin is an hour's drive, the grocery store twenty minutes—but the creek and the heron and the

turkeys and the wide, open sky make it worth the effort. I feel passionate about the place we live and the countryside that surrounds it.

But my passions—and yours, too—aren't written in stone. For instance, the kids have been in my life for thirty-something years, but I've only known Bill for a little over a decade. Before that, I felt passionate about another man. Before that, it was someone else. The history of my heart is a long one, and complex. (I'm sure that yours is, too). When I think about it, I see that the nature of my passionate attachments has altered as well: as I have grown older, they have grown less impulsive (I no longer fall in love at the drop of a cocktail onion). I like to think that my attachments now demand less from the other person and offer more, but I might be fooling myself—where our passions are concerned, we are not very objective. My work has changed a great deal in the last fifteen years, too: at one time I was passionate about my seventy-hour-a-week-job as a college dean, then as a vice president. In earlier years, I loved my work as a student—reading Shakespeare for the first time, and Ibsen, and Chaucer. These days I'm in love with writing books of my own, and teaching, and working with Bill in our small mail-order bookstore. As I think back over the history of my changing passions, I can see how it is also a record of my changing life. In fact, seen from one angle, the history of my heart is also the history of my life. What I choose to do every day is shaped by what I care for.

So what about you? Can you see how the story of *your* changing life has been written in your changing passions? Can you see how the things you care about have affected the things you do? To explore this idea for yourself, choose one of the particular passions you jotted down and write a few lines (or a paragraph or a page or as much as you like) about it, considering these questions:

What *is* this passion? How does it feel to me? Why do I feel this way about it?

How did this particular passion begin? Where, why, with whom, under what circumstances?

What does this passion mean to me or do for me? Has it altered me? If so, how?

What role does this passion play in my life?

Now, give some thought to the history of this particular passion, and write a few lines or a paragraph, with these two questions in mind:

What was my life like before this passion was born?

Was there another passion that played a similar role in my life?

If you learned something interesting about yourself from this exercise, repeat it with one or more of the other passions you noted down. You can use this material for the first section of your chapter: a catalog of your particular passions.

A different way to look at the history of your passions is to do what I like to call an inventory-by-decade—a very useful exercise when we're writing the

*To love what you do and feel that it matters—how could anything be more fun?—Katherine Graham*

*Just don't give up trying to do what you really want to do. Where there is love and inspiration, I don't think you can go wrong.—Ella Fitzgerald*

*It is for us to pray not for tasks equal to our powers, but for powers equal to our tasks, to go forward with a great desire forever beating at the door of our hearts as we travel toward our distant goal.—Helen Keller*

*Love is like a violin. The music may stop now and then, but the strings remain forever.—June Masters Bacher*

*“If I live every moment passionately, how can I be afraid of such a small thing as death?”—Suzanne Smith*

stories of our lives. At the top of your list, write this year: i.e. 1997 (or whatever year it is right now). On another sheet of paper, write the same date ten years before: say, 1987. Skip five or six lines and write the same date ten years before that—and so on, for as many decades as you can remember. Beside each date, list the three or four or five things you felt passionate about at the time. How have your passions shaped the story of your life? How have your passions changed? What do these changing passions teach you about the ways your life has changed?

How do these changing passions reveal the history of your heart? How can these changing passions help you tell your story?

Your list of passions and your thoughts about the changing nature of those passions make up the first section of your chapter, “Passionate Attachments.”

## ***A Passion for Place***

During her life, the poet and novelist May

Sarton was a woman of many strong passions. In her book *Plant Dreaming Deep*, written in 1968, she wrote of her passion for the house in which she lived, in a remote New Hampshire village. In this excerpt, she shows us the depth of her feeling, evoking it through color, texture, and pattern—a dazzle of delight.

*I spend the hour just after breakfast in the garden, picking whatever flowers I need to rearrange or start fresh six or more bunches... Wherever I look for the rest of the day there is always somewhere a shaft of light on flowers, and I feel them strongly as part of the whole presence of the house. Choosing, defining, creating harmony, bringing that clarity and shape that is rest and light out of disorder and confusion—the work that I do at my desk is not unlike arranging flowers. Only it is much harder to get started on writing something!—May Sarton*

The light here is magic... In those first days it was a perpetual revelation, as sunlight touched a bunch of flowers or a piece of furniture and then moved on. Early in the morning I watched it bring alive the bronzed-gray of the bird’s-eye maple of Mother’s desk in my study and make the flowers in the wreaths suddenly glow. In the afternoon, when I lay down for an hour in the cozy room, I saw it dapple the white mantelpiece and flow in waves across the wall there. And when I went into the kitchen to make tea, there it was again, lying in long dazzling rectangles on the yellow floor... In January and February the light is brilliant as snow is reflected on the white walls. In summer the light turns green; the shadows become diffuse...in October one’s eye is pulled outward, to look out and up into fiery bowers of maple leaves, or, early in the morning, across frost-silvered meadows.

Here is a different writer, a Canadian named Sharon Butala, with a different kind of passion for a very different, less settled place, the vast prairies of Saskatchewan where she lives with her rancher-husband Peter. This passage, describing her love for winter walks, comes from *The Perfection of the Morning: An Apprenticeship in Nature*.

I remember those walks each wintry morning as among the best of my life. I would head down the riverbed, following in the tracks of the cattle where the snow was too deep to walk comfortably. The banks of the river are high and steep, and the

winds had pushed the snow into deep banks that overhung the edges of the cliffsides in fat lips of snow that looked like waves on the ocean and from which long icicles sometimes hung. Looking up from the snowy riverbed, I saw white walls of snow and then the snowy billows and beyond them the brilliant sky. I saw the places where partridges snuggled up for the night to keep warm and followed the tracks of coyotes and foxes and animals whose tracks I didn't recognize...Running to cut off a cow, I fell headlong in the snow and, with no one watching me, lay there laughing, blinking up at the sky, losing myself in its blue depths.

*I am the woman who holds up the sky  
The rainbow runs through my eyes.  
The sun makes a path to my womb.  
My thoughts are changing as clouds,  
And words are coming to my mouth.  
—A Poem of the Ute Women*

These two passages are so marvelously different—Sarton's writing reveals a civilized, cultured indoor love of light and color, Butala's offers us a vibrant, active, participatory experience of uncivilized nature. Yet for all their differences, their passion for place is somehow the same.

If you have a passion for a certain place or places, you could write about the way your passion has shaped your story, and add that writing to your chapter. Here is what one woman wrote in a workshop:

When I moved into that tiny house, it was a wreck—holes in the walls, dog pee in the carpet, termites in the basement. But I gave my heart and soul to it for two years. I spent every spare minute and all my spare dollars to make it *my* house. I loved the dining room window with its eight panes, looking onto the stone-paved patio, where the roses climbed the fence. I adored the sunny kitchen, with the yellow-painted cupboards I stenciled with trailing ivy. I went to bed happy every night in the small blue room where the ceiling slanted over my bed. It was the first house I ever lived in alone—maybe that was why it was so important to me. But it also sheltered and anchored me through a tough divorce and several lean years afterward. The house was my passion. Without it, I think I might have gone crazy. —Amy T\*

*I keep remembering—I think it's a Sufi belief—the saying that when the pupil is ready, the teacher will come. My teacher was to be books...I didn't see it clearly at the time, but I was undergoing psychoanalysis, with myself as therapist to my own soul... I couldn't help but examine my own history, the story of my own life, which I began to mentally write, and sometimes put in my journal, for the first time. I began to comprehend that until I understood my own life I would not understand anything at all.—Sharon Butala*

You might build this section of your chapter by writing about your passion for the various places you have lived or visited. You might write about your passion for a country (I know several Anglophiles who live for their vacation trips to England, who read nothing but British novels, and who collect all kinds of British memorabilia). Or you might write about the passion you experienced in a particular place, as this writer did.

I will always remember that dark, dingy third-floor apartment (only one window, looking onto the alley) with sheer joy, for that was where Joe and I lived when we were first married. The bedroom wasn't much bigger than a closet, but what did we care? All we wanted was each other. We watched TV from the bed, we ate supper in bed, we made love in bed. It didn't matter that the alley smelled of garbage, or the neighbors fought like

*A woman's life can really be a succession of lives, each revolving around some emotionally compelling situation or challenge, and each marked off by some intense experience.—Wallis Simpson, Duchess of Windsor*

\*All unpublished writing is used with the permission of the writer, whose name has been changed to protect her identity.

cats and dogs, or that we had to wade through garbage on the stairs. We loved one another, and our passion painted everything with bright colors.

If you've experienced this sort of passion in a place, you don't forget it. Write about it! Tell your story, and allow it to take you deep into that remembered time.

## *Painful Passions*

Not all passions are glorious, beautiful, and uplifting. Some of our passions cause us pain, bring tears and regrets, create deep anxieties. But many psychologists point out that without pain, we are not likely to change or grow. Why should we go to the trouble of making significant changes if everything is working right in our lives?

*Pain is important: how we evade it, how we succumb to it, how we deal with it, how we transcend it.—Audre Lorde*

Telling the painful stories of our lives is *always* much harder than telling the happy ones. It is hard to start writing about a painful period, and even harder to stay with it. But facing any difficult feeling—grief, sadness, regret, anger, fear—is the first and most important step in the healing process. Taking that first step can be a journey all by itself.

*You will do foolish things, but do them with enthusiasm.—Collette*

Are there life-stories of your painful, passionate attachments that you have not yet written? If so, this is a good place to begin. You might start by sitting quietly for a few moments, thinking about one or two of these situations. If thinking about them makes you terribly uncomfortable or makes you feel at risk, you might take your writing materials to a place you enjoy and feel safe—such as a friendly neighborhood cafe or coffee shop—and write in public. Oddly, sitting among strangers, in a pleasantly distracting environment, can make us feel comfortable enough to write about the dark places in our lives.

*Great passion is like pain. You forget how commanding it is until it seizes you again.—Susan Albert*

What will you write about? Perhaps it was your passionate attachment to another person—lover, spouse, parent, child, friend—that caused you pain. Who was that person? What brought you and held you together? What was painful about it? Was there anything that *wasn't* painful? What did you learn from the difficult experience? How did it change your life?

Nancy Mairs is a writer I deeply admire. In her memoir, *Ordinary Time: Cycles in Marriage, Faith, and Renewal*, Mairs faces the darkneses of her marriage and finds a deep spiritual strength. Her writing is always rooted in the messy realities of life—she never pulls any punches, evades any questions. She writes with honesty and intensity about her multiple sclerosis, her husband's recurring melanoma, her difficult marriage and family. Here is a short piece that reflects her deep love for Matthew, a son she felt had rejected her and all her values. (The quotation marks indicate passages she has taken from her journal.)

From the outset he cried through most of his waking hours, all the more fiercely if I held and cuddled him; grief-stricken at his rejection, I retreated into the role of caretaker, dutiful enough but distant and wary. For years, I believe that I didn't love him...I felt certain that he knew of my failure and despised me for it. As he entered a tumultuous and defiant adolescence...I

could hardly stand the sight of him, “both sides of his head shaved, the hair on top sticking up in clumps. Neck and arms draped with chains and padlocks, studded strips of leather, filthy camouflage bandannas, loud neckties...”

But unlovable, unbeautiful as the son may be, the mother loves him, and learns that even her revulsion at his appearance is the mark of her own passionate attachment.

Everything in my experience and education had suggested that “love” was reactive, an upwelling of delight caused by the beloved’s pleasing looks or ways. My beloved did not please me. In fact, much of the time he drove me stark ravers. But he absorbed me utterly. And still does.

Have you ever been passionately attached to someone whose behavior or appearance drove you “stark ravers”? What did it feel like? What kept you connected to the person? If you could have severed your attachment and didn’t, why did you maintain it as long as you did, in the face of the pain? If you finally decided to free yourself from it, how and why did that happen? What were the results? Does “absorption” describe your involvement?

Sometimes we cannot free ourselves from an attachment, however painful it might be. For most of us, like them or not, our children and our parents are part of our story. Has that been true for you? Has there been a passionate attachment in your life from which you could not separate yourself? Writing that story might be a way of freeing yourself from the difficult bondage of the relationship without severing the connections. Or perhaps your painful attachment has been a psychological or physical addiction to *something*—to a addictive substance (food, alcohol, tobacco, drugs) or to a compulsive activity or process (gambling, spending money, lying, love). Acknowledging the power of the attachment is an absolutely essential first step in releasing ourselves from it. Writing about it and sharing your story with others who have been there can be an important part of the continuing release.

If your life story has contained several chapters of painful attachments, this would be a good place to recognize them. You don’t need to write about all of them, but just making notes might help you to see the patterns that underlie the pain. Here is what one woman wrote:

I was 42 years old before I realized that my life was one long history of tragic love affairs—relationships with men that never seemed to work out. When I sat down and wrote about Sam and Howie and Jack and Skeeter (to mention only the most important!), I could see that I hadn’t really loved *them*. It was *love* I was passionately attached to. And to get right down to it, hopeless love. Sam was married, Howie was gay, Jack was climbing the career ladder and didn’t want any excess baggage, Skeeter was the love-’em-and-leave-’em type. I can’t say that writing about it cured me, on the spot. But the next time I fell in love, I saw it coming, and after that, I was on my way.

*The true meaning of suffering is found in allowing each moment to be what it is, remaining open to the vastness—the life—that wants to move through us...We discover these depths through silence, stillness, and the simple act of being attentive with others. As we enter into exquisite awareness of the life that wants to live as us, we learn to love deeply. We claim our passion.—Gunilla Norris*

*To love deeply in one direction makes us more loving in all others.—Madame Swetchine*

*Life itself is the proper binge.—  
Julia Child*

*When I realized that it wasn’t that particular man I loved but love itself, it was like a 200-watt light bulb shining into my life.—  
Jill Warner*

*Love doesn't just sit there like a stone; it has to be made, like bread, remade all the time, made new.—Ursula Le Guin*

*We can do no great things—only small things with great love.—Mother Theresa*

*My passion is my garden: watching the plants grow, getting my hands in the dirt, loving the tiny roots, the green leaves. What joy!—Jill Toms*

*This conflict is one thing I've been waiting for. I'm well and strong and young—young enough to go to the front. If I can't be a soldier, I'll help soldiers.—Clara Barton*

*For me, prizes mean nothing. My prize is my work.—Katharine Hepburn*

Writing the stories of our painful attachments can be a way of understanding why we are so deeply connected and of eventually liberating ourselves from them their influence over us and restoring our power to *choose* what we will love.

## *Putting Your Chapter Together*

There are plenty of stories to include in a chapter on our attachments. So far, you may have written a history of your heart—a list of passions and your thoughts on how they have affected your life; some paragraphs or pages on places for which you have felt a deep and lasting affection; and some work on painful attachments from which you have found it hard to set yourself free. You might use some of these ideas to expand your chapter:

—Write about the craftwork you love to do. Women have written books about their love affairs with quilting and gardening and cooking. These important passions are a wonderful outlet for our creative energies, and can help us develop a wonderful circle of friends.

—Write about your passion for a cause. Many women have felt a powerful need to change something, like the sad, angry mother who established Mothers Against Drunk Driving, or the woman who founded the Gray Panthers to oppose age discrimination, or the women who work for peace or to preserve the environment or to save historical buildings. If you have been fired by the passionate energy to change an unjust or intolerable situation, write about it!

—Write about your passion for your work. Do you love what you do? Are you so committed to it that you can't wait to get your workday started? Are you passionately proud of what you have achieved? Writing about your passion for work can be a way of following your bliss, to borrow Joseph Campbell's phrase.

This chapter in your life story, like most others, will never be completed, of course. We are creatures of passion, and will be until the day we die, and our life stories will be shaped by our changing passions. Recognizing that, it is also true that we must write from where we are, from today's point of view, from the present moment. Where are you now? What are your passions? How have they empowered you, hurt you, helped you to grow?

Write.



# True Words from Real Women

In this section of each *Story Circle Journal*, we will publish your contributions of poetry and prose, published or unpublished. Since this is our first issue, we thought it would be helpful to publish our Writers Guidelines. We look forward to reading your work, and including the best of it in the *Journal*.

## Submitting Your Writing

— We're looking for short (150 words maximum) excerpts from your life-writing. Your excerpt may be thoughtful, funny, sad, angry, contrite, searching, clever, observant—whatever tells your story and expresses your feelings. That's the most important thing: that your writing tells your story and expresses your feelings, in your own true voice.

— Prose is fine, short poems are fine, too (up to 30 lines). We can also accept your black-and-white sketches and drawings (writers often scribble in the margins!) if they are clear enough to reproduce.

— Since our issues are thematically organized, we solicit writing that fits the theme. (See "In the Works," p. 3, for the 1997 themes.) However, we welcome expressive, authentic writing on any topic.

— Space for "True Words" is limited, and we may not be able to accept your work for the *Journal*. However, we hope to be able to publish one or more collections of women's life-writing, and will hold all submissions for later consideration. No submissions will be returned, so please keep a copy of everything you send. Sorry, but we can't critique submissions.

— Submissions should be typed and double-spaced, or *very clearly written in your neatest handwriting*. Submit as often as you like, as much as you like. (That is, you can send us three or four 150-word excerpts and several poems at once.)

— Tell us whether you want us to print your name, city, and state (*Jane Dare, Tampa FL*) with your writing, or give us a pseudonym. Without this explicit direction, we will choose a name for you, and print your piece without a city/state. Be sure to put your name and address on each submission, however.

— By submitting your material to *The Story Circle Journal*, you give us the explicit right to publish it, in any format, at any time. If we publish it in any format other than the *Journal*, we will let you know. If your submission has already been printed elsewhere, tell us where and when. (Reprints are fine.)

— At the present time, we cannot pay writers. If we use your work, however, we will send you two additional copies of the issue in which it appears.

—Our deadlines: April 1 (for the May issue), July 1 (for August), October 1 (for November), January 1 (for February).



## Submitting Quotations

We use women's quotations in the *Journal* and in other publications.

If you would like to contribute your favorite brief (1-to-3 sentence) quotations, please type or write them clearly, including the name of the writer or speaker and the source, if you know it.

We're especially interested in quotations that fit *Journal* themes, but you may send any quotations.

About copyright. In general, copyright law permits the "fair use" of prose excerpts of up to about 325 words without the copyright holder's permission. However, no poetry (not even a single line) may be used without permission. These rules do *not* affect poetry or prose that is in the public domain—that is, no longer under copyright (Emily Dickenson's poetry, for instance, or Jane Austen's novels).

Because it can take months to obtain permission, we prefer to use items under the "fair use" rule, or pieces no longer in copyright.



## Pen Pals, Writing Partners, Round Robins, and Etcetera

*The easiest kind of relationship for me is with ten thousand people. The hardest is with one.—Joan Baez*

*Writing is about telling the truth and paying attention.—Anne Lamott*

*Few comforts are more alluring for a woman than the rich intimate territory of women's talk. A woman friend will say, "You are not alone. I have felt that way, too. This is what happened to me." Home, in other words.—Elsa Walsh*

*I know myself most deeply when I know another woman deeply, when I know you. When we share our stories, you give me my self, and I give you your self. This is the way it works. Apart from this generosity of soul sharing with soul, I can never know myself nor you.—Susan Albert*

In this column each month, we will list the names of women who would like to exchange letters, life stories, poetry. Perhaps you are looking for an old-fashioned pen pal with whom to share experiences, explore differences, and compare notes about the writing life. Or perhaps your interest is more focussed: perhaps you would like to correspond with women whose story is like yours in some special way. You grew up on a farm, for instance; or your family moved from one military base to another. Or perhaps you were the daughter of an alcoholic parent, or your own child has experienced a severe illness. What could you learn from exchanging stories? How might you grow?



Another way to share our stories is through a "Story-Circle-By-Mail." (Can somebody think of a clever name for this?) I participated in this sort of thing some years ago, organized by some creative women in Washington state (I think). As I remember, it worked like this. Someone agreed to volunteer as a facilitator, and collected the names of four to six participants. The facilitator started things off by mailing an introductory letter to the first participant. That woman added her own story, then sent the two-letter packet to the second participant, who added her story and mailed it to... Got the idea? After the initial round of introductions, participants selected a particular theme or topic to write about, just as we do in a Story Circle group. The group was limited in size in order to keep the letter-packet moving, and everybody agreed to some ground rules to make sharing easier. Ten years later, I still correspond with a few of the women I met in this way and count them among my closest friends.

If you would like to participate in a "Story-Circle-By-Mail," send us your name and address and tell us if you are willing to facilitate the group. At our end, we'll put names together at random and identify a facilitator. We can stay in touch, and after you've experimented with several exchanges, maybe we could share ideas for organizing and publicizing this activity in a more formal way.

What other ideas do you have for sharing our stories by mail? We'd love to hear them, and to use this column for exploring ways to reach out to one another and to create an enduring network of friends.



## Books for the Journey

*In each issue, we'll review books that teach us something important about women's stories. Some of these books 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.*

**The Knitting Sutra: Thoughts on Handcrafts, Nature and Spirit**, by Susan Gordon Lydon (*Harper SanFrancisco, February, 1997*).

This wonderful, and unusual, book shows us how our passion can lead us inward, to the spirit. Susan Gordon Lydon is a knitter, a teacher, and an inspiring writer. The making of crafts, she says, brings us into the circle of women who, throughout human history, have poured their passionate souls into the making of serviceable and beautiful things. "I knit because I love to knit," she says, "because the process of designing and then fashioning a piece of clothing with my hands is something that has excited and inspired me since childhood." Fired with her passion, she knits constantly (whenever she's not writing), finding that she needs to keep several projects going at one time in order to satisfy her need for variety. But the busy-ness of knitting gives Lydon food for thought: "If the devil makes work for idle hands," she asks, "then could constantly busy hands entice angels to whisper in the knitter's ear? And is it possible that female spirituality through the ages may have been concealed in the minutiae of domestic life rather than expressed in the grandiosity and pomposity of churches and sermons?" If you can read just one new book by a woman whose passionate attachment has led her deep into the soul, this is it. And if you're a knitter, you'll find an extra delight in this treasure.



**Journeying in Place: Reflections from a Country Garden**, by Gunilla Norris (*Crown, 1994*).

Gunilla Norris lives in a farmhouse on two acres of Connecticut woods and meadow. That is the small place that opens her to a quiet passion for the depth and breadth of life. "I have come to know that in these two acres there is intense and quiet activity that is *happening* twenty-four hours a day," she says. "I miss most of it. I get caught up in what must be done and therefore fail to experience the sunsets, the budding of the raspberries, the rusting of old farm implements in the earth, the building of wasp nests, and the death of old trees. But I feel the vibration of it all and I want to know this eventfulness better." The book is her way of exploring, and a gift of knowing that she generously shares.

Reading Norris's soft, tenderly observant prose, I feel that I know her woods and meadows and their seasons, and that I know *her* through the landscape she loves. And what I learn from reading her writing is the importance of the tiny things we often fail to see. The baby mice in the nest on the garage shelf, for instance, that show Norris (and me), how *new* we are: "Each time I come into newness I, too, am pink like this, pulsing, and vulnerable...New relationships, new dwellings, new jobs, new understandings. My eyes do not quite function. My skin is paper thin. It is always a sheer time, an intimate time, when, like all



*It's endless, this tiny domestic world of knitting...it is infinite and seemingly inexhaustible in its capacity to inspire, excite, and provoke creative insight. The activity itself is satisfying, addictive, absorbing, enjoyable, and productive. It is soothing and meditative in nature. And, as an added bonus, it results in something useful.—Susan Gordon Lydon.*

*There is no other way than presence and engagement, participation and compassion. Loving the whole, learning as we go, living as we live.—Gunilla Norris*

*Spare...knowing that less is more. Less need to improve, less trying, less judgement, less regret. I am learning about this, year after year. Slowly the self-imposed abstinence gives me freedom. This is not always an easy process. It often feels like dying. Perhaps I am practicing for the day when I will have to give up everything, when I will be in another garden altogether—Gunilla Norris*

## More Books for the Journey



*No love is ever lost in this universe. No matter what season, what year, what place, love will always be turned into new soil.—Gunilla Norris*

newborns, I need protection badly.” A lot to be learned from a nest of baby mice! But it is in these exquisitely detailed observations that Norris shines, and brings us close to the center of her passion for place.

I found this book in a trio of Norris’s writings published by Quality Paperback Book Club. You may have to look around to find it, but it’s worth the search. And put her on your list of writers to watch for.



**Room to Write: Daily Invitations to a Writer’s Life**, by Bonni Goldberg. (Tarcher/Putnam, 1996)

*Since creative writing is an act of love, it is impossible not to be, in some sense, always writing about love...The trick is to stay honest about the nature of whichever love you write about.—Bonni Goldberg*

Bonni Goldberg is an award-winning poet and writer, whose passion for the sound and sense of words has led her to commit herself to a life of writing and teaching writing. In *Room to Write*, she shares that passion, and shows us how daily writing practice can lead us into new worlds of the self. “Writing, like any spiritual undertaking,” she observes, “has many paths, but only one direction—deeper.” The book offers two hundred “studies,” short writing practices that you can pick up and do whenever the spirit moves you. What I like about it is its versatility (you can dive into it at any point and come up wherever you like), its portability (it is a small-format book that will fit into your purse), and its companionable style. Goldberg is a friend who speaks to us softly, encouragingly, urging us to listen and trust our passion and never fear it. She has offered us a valuable resource. Treasure it!



**The Norton Book of Women’s Lives**, edited by Phyllis Rose (W.W. Norton, 1993).

*As I see it, the literature of women’s lives is a tradition of escapees, women who have lived to tell the tale. By and large, they seem determined to prove that womanhood is no handicap, that women can live as freely as men. They are remarkably inventive about their lives. They resist captivity. They get up and go.—Phyllis Rose*

I love anthologies because they are so rich and various. This one, edited by a woman with a clear, strong ear for women’s voices, has plenty to offer: 61 substantial selections from the twentieth-century literature of women’s autobiographies, journals, and memoirs.

“I didn’t want to do my duty,” Phyllis Rose says of herself growing up. (She wanted to be a cowgirl.) “Nor did I want models...of noble self-sacrifice and altruism. I wanted wild women, women who broke loose, women who lived life to the full, whatever that meant. What *did* it mean to live life to the full? How fully could a woman live?” In this collection, we hear a chorus of “wild women” who show us in many ways how fully we might live. What stories these are, what fascinating lives, lived on the edge of pain, perception, and truth. These are lives that liberate and enlarge the rest of us. Read them, retell them, and use them as models for telling your own story.



## Getting Around: Story Circle News

In this column, we expect to bring you news from the Story Circles that have been meeting in various cities. Please write and let us know what your group is doing, where it is meeting and when, and how to get in contact with the facilitator. We'll print your information so that others in your area know about your work.

Since the Network is just getting underway, let's talk a little about setting up a Story Circle. It's a simple process, really. All you need is a few friends who are willing to read together, write together, and share their stories—the stories of their lives. You can use *Writing From Life* (it's a good place to start) or some of the books listed in its bibliography. Or you can make up your own reading list. The important thing is to write your own life and read women's lives. That's all there is to it.

If you don't have a group of interested friends, here are a few ideas for ways you might start a group. Try contacting the manager of your local bookstore, and offer to lead a reading/writing group. Many bookstores are eager to sponsor groups these days, and you may be surprised by the enthusiasm. The store might be able to offer you a place to meet, a mailing list, and even free publicity.

If a bookstore doesn't work for you, you might try the local library. Some libraries have special-focus groups meeting almost every night of the week. Like bookstores, libraries are often willing to help out with a location and publicity. And what better place to meet readers and writers than libraries? Or perhaps there are professional groups in your area that have many women members: teachers' groups, nurses' organizations, women's business groups, and so on. One of these associations might be willing to sponsor a life-writing group. You might also try the local area churches and synagogues, YWCAs, and women's centers. If any of these groups have newsletters, a notice of your newly-forming group might attract attention and bring you some members.

Some groups are able to work easily together without a particular leader, deciding what they are going to do by getting a consensus of opinion. Other groups are organized more formally, with a leader or facilitator who gets people together and helps them choose a direction. Still others are organized by a leader who creates a program plan, invites people to participate, and helps members get the most out of the group's activities. If you are thinking of starting a group, it would be useful for you to decide at the very beginning how you think such a group could be structured. If you have had experience in teaching, leading, or facilitating women's groups, you might be the very person your group needs to get it started and keep it going.

If you would like some more ideas about creating a Story Circle in your community, write for the *Guide for Story Circle Facilitators*. (Send \$1 to Story Circle Network, PO Drawer M, Bertram TX 78605.)

*When we come together in a Story Circle, we take on responsibility not only for ourselves, but for one another. My most essential obligation is to tell my story, with all the clarity and truth I can summon. But I have another task, and that is to be present to the stories of others in the circle, to bear witness to their clarity and insight and truth—our common truth...We are mutual presences, simply, and in that attentive being-with, that delicate, careful listening, we help one another bring forth—ourselves.—Susan Albert, in *Writing From Life**



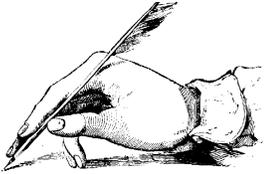
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