



Story Circle Journal

Volume 1 Number 2

A newsletter for women who have stories to

SC Network Receives Non-Profit Charter, Plans Activities

by Susan Wittig Albert

When the storyteller tells the truth, she reminds us that human beings are more alike than unlike.... A story is what it's like to be a human being—to be knocked down and to miraculously arise. Each one of us has arisen, awakened. We do rise.
—Maya Angelou

In early April, the Story Circle Network officially became the Story Circle Network Incorporated, a non-profit organization chartered by the State of Texas to encourage women to tell their stories. The Network is the only organization in the country exclusively designed to foster women's storytelling and to create and support a nation-wide community of women story-tellers.

A group of 25 women gathered to celebrate the landmark event with a meeting at the Austin home of Carol Abbassi, the Network's new Program Coordinator. It was a wonderful evening. We felt like voyagers into new and unexplored territory as we shared hopes, imagined projects and activities, and dreamed toward an exciting future.

Some of our dreams focussed on possible Network activities in Austin, in other cities, and across the country. Story Circles are already forming in cities across the country, and are beginning to report on their local activities. We have begun offering classes and workshops in women's storytelling in the Austin, San Antonio, and Houston areas, and we'll be doing more of that in the future. We also hope to hold a national Women's Storytelling Conference, perhaps as early as

1999 and probably in the Austin area. Other ideas and suggestions that we'll be considering include the development of a research center and depository library for women's stories, the creation of a bookstore and lending library, the publication of an annotated reading list of women's autobiographies and biographies; and the encouragement of Readers' Story Circles (to complement the writing circles that are already underway).

Participants came up with many other exciting ideas: a clearinghouse for the publication of women's stories; a traveling exhibit of women's stories in a variety of media (film, photos, textiles, dolls, paintings, and so on); and the creation of a web site. We also hope to connect with other organizations—such as libraries, churches, retirement homes, women's studies programs, prisons, and shelters—that might be interested in cooperative programs.

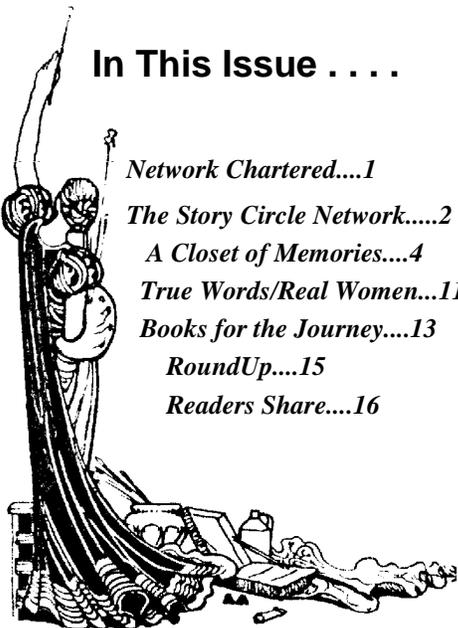
And of course, there is the *Story Circle Journal*, which is just now publishing its second issue—and the many possibilities for networking that the *Journal* offers through its Round Robin and Pen Partners programs, and in the opportunity for readers to share their stories.

Big dreams? You bet! Our discussion (lively, animated, and often delightfully unruly) demonstrated that

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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.

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!



In the Works

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

August, 1997—The Soul's Story: Spiritual Journeys (deadline 7/1/97)

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)



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.

Editor: Susan Wittig Albert
Associate Editor and Program
Coordinator: Carol Abbassi

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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!

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Story Circle Network

Network Chartered—from Page 1

the only limit to the Network's potential is the interest of its participants and volunteers and the amount of energy and time they are able and willing to contribute!

We will be holding at least one other Austin-area brainstorming session this spring. Then, in order to meet the requirements of our Texas charter, a board of directors will be appointed, by-laws written and approved, and work begun to obtain our Federal tax-exempt status. The board will also develop a budget, plan the programs for the remainder of 1997, and begin discussing ideas for our first national Women's Storytelling Conference. If that sounds like a lot of work, it is! But it's fascinating work, and we're ready to roll up our sleeves and pitch in.

Where do you come into all of this ground-breaking activity? For now, our link to you is through the *Story Circle Journal*, which will keep you updated on our progress as we develop these new programs. But we hope that, as the months unfold, we will be able to connect with you more directly. If you (or your Story Circle, women's group, or church) are interested in sponsoring a Story Circle Workshop in your area, write to us for information about available dates, costs, and program fees. The lecture/workshop activities may also include a facilitator training component that will make it easy for you to create an on-going Story Circle in your own community.

You may also have some ideas for

Network activities that our imaginative brainstorming groups haven't thought of, or suggestions for connections with other organizations. If so, please send them along, and we'll pass them on to our board of directors. Of course, we can't do everything all at once—or even half of it! But we would like to begin with the widest possible vision of the future, so that we don't close out opportunities, or neglect potentials for growth.

And as always, we urge you to take advantage of the networking programs offered through the *Journal*. Several people have volunteered to facilitate Round Robin groups (currently called "Story Circle in the Round"), so send in your name and we'll pass it along. You can also request our Writers' Guidelines and contribute your story to the *Journal*. Or you can ask for our Reviewers' Guidelines and send in a book review. And watch for our web site, coming soon to a computer near you.

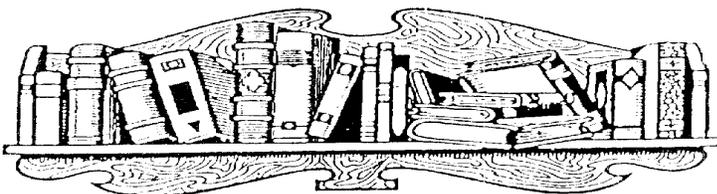
There are so many ways to connect with one another and share our stories—ways that our grandmothers never dreamed of. Let's take advantage of *all* of those connections! So stay in touch and let us hear *your* ideas for activities you would like to see in the Network's exciting future.

This is what it is to be a writer: to be the carrier of details that make up history.... Our task is to say a holy yes to the real things of our life as they exist—the real truth of who we are: several pounds overweight, the gray, cold street outside, the Christmas tinsel in the showcase, the Jewish writer in the orange booth across from her blond friend who has black children. We must become writers who accept things as they are, come to love the details.
—Natalie Goldberg

What Is, Is

Curtailing all activity
To note the arrival of spring
For you never know
When the first blossom will appear.
In fact, it is safe to say
That no one person has ever seen
The very first. Soft petals of light
That were nonexistent yesterday, but
bloom forth today. Spring begins its
inevitable course while no one is
watching.
Some even mistakenly believe that
Winter is prolonged, spring delayed.
While waiting to see buds on trees,
Day after day, knowing what is
True is True, you still allow the
thought,
What if?
Now hear this:
What has been sown blooms,
What has roots holds,
Prayer offered is returned,
Your heart's intent does not go
unnoticed.
Asked and answered,
Sought and found,
Known and owned
Spring is an annual
commemoration
Of how you begin.

Robyn Gail Whyte
Austin TX



A Closet of Memories

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 your closet, pull out those memories, and start writing!*

When We Were Young



I was inspired to write this piece by a wonderful little book (only 139 pages, half of them drawings) by Ilene Beckerman. It is called *Love, Loss, and What I Wore*, and it made me smile and swallow hard and smile again. It reminded me that women have a special affection for the clothing they wear, and very special memories attached to certain dresses, blouses, skirts, suits, party clothes—as well as shoes, scarves, jewelry, and even makeup. Most of us can tell the story of our lives, and even chart the growth of our souls, through the clothing we have worn and loved. So I invite you to take a journey through the closets of your memory, pulling out first this dress, then that pair of slacks, and reflecting on what they meant to you. I invite you to write a chapter—or an entire book, perhaps—about clothes. Or if you're not in the mood for prose, you might try a collection of poems.

Memory is like a muscle. The more you use it, the stronger it becomes. One memory sparks another. Each time you write from memory, another fragment filed in that ninety percent of the human brain that science doesn't understand slips into consciousness and a creative shift takes place.—Bonni Goldberg

Let's start with childhood—always a good place to begin. Sit quietly for a few minutes, relaxing, letting the mind settle. Then, in your memory, go back to your school days, to third or fourth grade or fifth grade, and see yourself. What are you wearing? A dress, a skirt and blouse, jeans? Is there anything special about it? Who bought it or made it? Do you like this clothing? How does it make you feel? Is it different from or similar to your friends' clothing? Now, set a timer for five minutes and write about what you wore back then. Or, instead of a timer, you might use a piece of music—if you have it, music from the era you're writing about (the 30's, 50's, 70's, etc.) may help to spark your memory.

What I fear in writing is the safe decision.—Anne Rice

Here is an example of the kind of writing you might do. This piece was written by a woman named Chris, whose use of the present tense makes her writing powerfully evocative and immediate:

I am eight or nine, tall for my age and so embarrassed by my height that I pull my shoulders forward, bend my spine like the curve of a snail shell, and push my hips forward. I am wearing what I always wear to school at St. E's—plain white short-sleeved cotton blouse with a blue scarf knotted under the collar, blue-and-black plaid skirt (the ripped hem is hitched up with a safety pin, which I pray Sister Celia won't spot), white anklets, scuffed brown Mary Janes with the heels run over. I hate this costume, which makes me feel like I'm pretending to be somebody I'm not. I hate myself in it, and I hate all the other girls who are wearing exactly the same thing and always act as

if there's nothing they'd rather do. But most of all, I hate my mother for consigning me to a place where everyone looks alike, simply because it is convenient for her to put me here. How can I ever learn who I am if I have to be like everyone else?

—Chris B.*

There's clear detail here, and strong feeling—and tension, as well, which is the heart of any good story. Can you see how Chris's school costume functions as a creative symbol of her inner conflict, and of the conflict between her and the world of parochial school and mother? If you're like me, you'd like to know more. How did Chris resolve this conflict? How did she manage to discover her own identity? There's an interesting story hidden away in this innocent-looking school costume.

There are stories hidden in all of our closets. Here is another, from one of the most beloved storytellers of our time, Maya Angelou. This description of an Easter dress made of lavender taffeta appears on the very first page of her memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and serves as a symbol for the whole memoir, a tribute to a writer whose painful experiences became the very stuff of her joyful liberation. Notice how much Angelou reveals about herself as she remembers the way she felt about the dress:

As I'd watched Momma put ruffles on the hem and cute little tucks around the waist, I knew that once I put it on I'd look like a movie star...one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right with the world. Hanging softly over the black Singer sewing machine, it looked like magic....Just thinking about it made me go around with angel's dust sprinkled over my face for days. But Easter's early morning sun had shown the dress to be a plain ugly cut-down from a white woman's once-was-purple throwaway. It was old-lady-long too, but it didn't hide my skinny legs, which had been greased with Blue Seal Vaseline and powdered with the Arkansas red clay...

Look back at your own writing. Are there ways you can sharpen the detail, bring a latent conflict into the open, or reveal more about the inner self? You might try rewriting the piece to see if you can bring it into clearer focus. And, if you enjoyed this exercise, you might try writing several more pieces, describing the clothes you recall from different periods of your childhood or teen years. Do any of these pieces of clothing suggest conflict or tension? Are any of them especially symbolic? If you're having trouble remembering what might have been in your closet when you were young, here are some suggestions. See if they open any special memories for you:

Learning to live creatively continues as long as we're alive. We never "arrive." When we devote ourselves to a creative lifestyle, we're committed to a life of growth directed by our creative self. We receive the greatest of all possible rewards: we become who we truly are, free of accumulated expectations. We are the female hero.—Diane Ealy

*The day was a Thursday, July 3. It was deathly hot. I was wearing a short dress of a synthetic silky fabric, flower-printed, and my thighs stuck to my chair. I wore patent leather shoes with no hose—too hot. This was nearly thirty years ago, but I can still remember how the four buttons at the top of the dress in back fitted through loops of fabric and left little gaps.... — Suzanne Lipsett. (You must read this entire piece, which appears as Chapter Two, "Raw Material," in Lipsett's book, *Surviving A Writer's Life. July 3 was the day the writer was raped.*)*

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

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

Psychologically considered, the first step of conscious recognition enables the seeing of the pattern. Conscious naming is a first step of freedom from the negative structure.—Linda Schierse Leonard

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



party dress
recital dress
ballet or skating costume
Halloween outfit
club or group uniform (Brownie? 4-H?)
costume for play or festival or special event
bathing suit

Ah, yes, bathing suit. Does that ring a bell for you? It did for this writer:

It wasn't a teeny-weeny yellow polka dot bikini, it was a red one—with halter straps that bit into my sunburned neck and a bottom so brief that I felt positively naked. Not that I had anything significant to reveal: at fifteen I was as curvy as a broomstick. I looked much better in the YWCA regulation tank suit that my mother approved. But my best friend Ginni (we all had names that ended in *i* in those years—Kathi, Tammi, Patti) had just bought a green bikini, and begged me to buy one too so she wouldn't feel so conspicuous. I can see us now, creeping across the sand, towels tied casually (but concealingly) around our waists, beach bags hugged to our flat bosoms, huge hats hiding our flaming faces. And I can see my little brother unexpectedly coming down the beach, see his surprise as he recognizes me—and count the dollars I paid to keep him from telling Mama about that red bikini.

A collection of short pieces or vignettes about clothing, arranged end to end, could easily form your entire chapter. In fact, many memoirs are written in just this way—no over-arching structure or organization or “big story,” just bits and pieces of memories, lightly tacked together in a sequence. This allows you to capture the recollections and begin to understand what they mean to you, without having to worry about how everything fits together. The “fitting together” can come later, after you have a clearer sense of all the elements.

The “Special Moments” Collection

In every culture in human history, special occasions have called for special kinds of clothing, body decoration, or hair arranging. In some Native American communities, for instance, a young woman celebrated the onset of her menstruation by bathing and putting on various body colorings, donning a specially-sewn dress, and participating in an important ritual. Our culture is no different, and each of us, during the course of our lives, has collected many “special moments” clothes.

In the midwestern town where I grew up during the 1950s, one of these “special moments” costumes was the Junior Prom dress—a strapless “formal” with a bouffant skirt, constructed of a stiff, scratchy net. My formal was pale blue with silver sequins all over it and wire hoops sewn into the skirt to hold it out, and I wore a silver ruffly sort of thing in my hair. My boyfriend Jim gave me a wrist corsage of white carnations attached to an elastic band, and I buried my nose in it while we danced, loving the sweet, spicy scent of the flowers. I will never smell carnations without thinking of that dress, and the crepe-paper-

draped gym, and the way my skirt billowed and swung around me as we danced.

Think for a moment about your own “special moments” clothing collection, hung in the closet of your memory. Your First Communion dress might be there, together with the dress you wore on your first date. Your prom dress, too could be on that rack, and the outfit you were wearing the day you met your first sweetheart, or his “letter sweater,” or your cheerleading outfit. Perhaps you’ll find there your commencement robe, the suit you wore on your first job, or a special outfit so expensive that you had to give up lunch for a year just to pay for it. Or perhaps some other kind of sacrifice was involved—a long and arduous training, for instance, as in the case of an Olympic uniform, or the green scrubs of a neurosurgeon. Is a wedding dress there, too—or more than one? How about a special maternity outfit, or perhaps the suit you wore to your mother’s or father’s funeral?

Each of these items of clothing was purchased or made to celebrate or commemorate a passage from one stage of life to another. The woman who wore that wedding dress or the first-job suit or the maternity outfit was *changing* in a wonderful way, and each of those garments holds a special memory of that change. Can you describe the dress so completely, so vividly that someone who reads or hears your description can actually see it? Can you describe your feelings when you wore the costume so compellingly that they can be experienced by others? And can you say how you feel now, looking back at those clothes and remembering what it was like to be the person who wore them?

Here is the description of a wedding dress, written during a five-minute timed writing exercise. Notice the care the writer has taken to create a detailed picture of the dress, which seems to have become a symbol of what some writers have called the “motherline”—the connection between mother and daughter that stretches back as far as we can see:

My wedding dress was cream-colored satin, with a high-necked bodice decorated with lace and tiny pearls and narrow sleeves that came to a point over my wrists, and a satin skirt that fell smoothly to the floor—an old-fashioned dress, because it was my mother’s wedding dress before it was mine. Her mother, my grandmother, had made it of a piece of satin that was already old even then, in 1936. Into Mother’s bridal bouquet Gran had woven the cream-colored velvet ribbons she had saved from her own bouquet, carried in 1914, and these were a part of my bouquet, too. The dress wasn’t a perfect fit, but we managed to make it look good. When I wore it, I felt as if I were part of an important tradition, as if the history of my mother’s and grandmother’s marriages were somehow woven into my marriage. My own marriage was separating me from my mother—I would no longer be “just” her daughter, but a wife too—but in an odd way, it brought me closer to her. Soon, my daughter will be married in this treasure of a dress (not a perfect fit for her, either!), and I hope her daughter as well.—*Sonya J.*

Learning to write may be part of learning to read. For all I know, writing comes out of a superior devotion to reading.—Eudora Welty

My aunt gave me her old red A-line coat when I was pregnant with the twins in 1957. I wore it from September to April, feeling like a mammoth red elephant every time I put it on. When cold weather came again, I hated to go out because I knew people were snickering at the sight of this clumsy red elephant with a plastic handbag over her arm, pushing a stroller with a broken wheel, loaded with babies and grocery bags. I kept the babies, but I gave the coat back to my aunt and replaced it with a narrow, svelt black coat with a velvet collar. But by September of 1959 I was pregnant again, and when my aunt offered the coat, I took it back. After Charlie was born, the coat went to the Salvation Army and I started taking The Pill.—Roberta Pape

We went to Saks Fifth Avenue together for the dress, and he, so pleased and excited to be a groom, lingered for a while over something in green wool, with fake leopard cuffs. Young, and as innocent in his way as I was in mine, he had no idea of what, besides ten yards of tulle, women got married in. Finally we picked a cocktailish kind of thing in beige silk taffeta, with a high neck, a low back, and a big bow. I was wearing my new Capezios, dark red suede with black heels, when I tried it on, and the saleslady, not knowing it was to be my wedding gown, said, “Be sure you wear these shoes with this. They look wonderful.”—Mary Cantwell

Clothing may be a way of connecting us to a long and important tradition,

Writers have a little holy light within, like a pilot light which fear is always blowing out. When a writer brings a manuscript fresh from the making, at the moment of greatest vulnerability, that's the moment for friends to help get the little holy light lit again.—Cynthia Ozick

I base my fashion taste on what doesn't itch.—Gilda Radner

*Typical underwear we wore on a date: girdle, garter belt, and stockings with seams. If we had our periods, we also wore a sanitary belt and a Kotex or Modess pad. We wore underpants over everything, then a half-slip, then a crinoline.
—Ilene Beckerman*

The basic Female Body comes with the following accessories: garter belt, panty girdle, crinoline, camisole, bustle, brassier, stomacher, chemise, virgin zone, spike heels, nose ring, veil, kid gloves, fishnet stockings, fichu, bandeau, Merry Widow, weepers, chokers, barrettes, bangles, beads, lorgnette, feather boa, basic black, compact, Lycra stretch one-piece with modesty panel, designer peignoir, flannel nightie, lace teddy, bed, head. —Margaret Atwood

but it may also be a way of declaring our independence. From Nancy Friday's book *The Power of Beauty*, here is a description of a "special collection" costume that has the capacity to transform its wearer from a "nice," ordinary working girl to someone who looks and acts quite different:

One day, walking west on East Fifty-fourth Street—it was morning, maybe 9:00 a.m.—I saw a bright tangerine silk shirt and traffic-stopping fuchsia skirt in a brownstone window.... Thus I was introduced to Rudi Gernreich and serious fashion, meaning I began to save my money. When I eventually slipped the rainbow over my head, edging the narrow skirt over my hips, the look was transforming, as in a fairy tale. The colors of clothes may seem a strange way to proclaim one's separation, but given the significant role of sex in establishing identity, Gernreich's tight, bright clothes became my racing colors. In wearing them, there was no longer any waffling as to whether or not I wanted to be seen.

The following year I found a Gernreich white silk/jersey tube, sleeveless, floor length, and with a V in the back so deep that underwear was out of the question. An architect who was my date that New Year's Eve had given me a dazzling white feather boa to complete the picture. Upon entering our first party of the evening, an older woman accused, "You used to be a pretty girl," convincing me that that I had for the first time in my life aroused the envy of beauty in another woman.

Look through your own closet of memories and see if you can pull out clothing that seemed to bind you closer to a tradition. Then look for a different kind of clothing, something that broke with traditional styles. What did these two kinds of clothes look like? How were they different? What did they represent to you? How did you feel when you wore them? How did other people respond to you? Think about these questions for a few minutes, then write as much as you can on the subject.

Outgrown Clothes

In her wonderful memoir, *Manhattan, When I was Young*, Mary Cantwell about a time in her life, when, fresh out of college, she took an apartment in New York and began looking for a job. In this vignette, she remembers herself and her roommate Allie, getting out of bed and dressing to look for a job:

Both of us are wearing pajamas with fly fronts and rope ties, because the fashion in the women's college from which we have just graduated was to dress like a boy unless you were going away for a football weekend, in which case you packed a sheath so you could look like a vamp. Allie's hair is in pincurls, mine is in kidskin rollers, and there are a few dots of Acnomel on my chin.

In a few minutes I will struggle into my Sarong girdle... which I don't need, because on my fattest day I weigh only 118 pounds. Then I will put on a sternly constructed cotton broadcloth bra, which I also don't need, a full-breasted nylon

slip, and the pink Brooks Brothers shirt and black-and-white-checked gingham skirt that constitute my version of office garb. My shoes are black suede pumps, leftovers from my sheath days.

A little while later, Mary goes to interview for a job at *Mademoiselle*:

Now, when I visualize myself in that lobby, waiting for the elevator...I am touched by the sight of me: my feet uncertain in high heels and my gloved hands clutching one of my mother's cast-off purses. But I, though dimly aware that suede was unsuitable in summer, probably thought I looked swell.

I admire these passages for the gentle, compassionate self-irony that underlies them, and the sense of time passing and past. In the first paragraph above, Mary Cantwell has already graduated from college and moved to New York. While she is still wearing some of her college clothes, she has already outgrown them and is ready to put on something else. But the clothes she wears—a girdle she doesn't need, a "sternly constructed" bra, her mother's purse—don't fit either. Looking back, she can see how "in-between" she was in those days, having outgrown one stage of life but not quite ready for the next. And as she looks back, she can smile with wry affection at the recollection of her younger self waiting for the elevator, with a cast-off purse and "uncertain" high heels.

Think about your own closets, over the years. Can you think of clothes you have outgrown, styles that belonged to a particular era or way of life, outfits you used to wear but would not wear now? Sort back through your memories and see if you can find clothing that evokes a time or a place or a part of yourself that isn't around any longer, whom you have outgrown. How do you feel about that outgrown self? How do you feel about those outgrown clothes?

There is one other issue that you might want to take up here, and that is the question of who we dress for—ourselves or somebody else. Here again is Nancy Friday, reflecting on the fifties:

The way we looked back then...was the way we were. Nice Girls looking for Nice Men to take care of them had a virginal look that promised continuity to would-be suitors....Women packaged themselves for the eyes of men so as to capture their protection and power. "I'll die if you leave me!" wasn't just a line from a 1950s movie heroine, it was real life, how it felt.

Can you remember times when you dressed for someone else? What did you wear? How did you look and feel? What were you trying to achieve? What was the response of the person or persons for whom you were dressing? How was that clothing different from clothing you might have chosen for yourself? What did that clothing represent to you, and to the other person? Are you still wearing those clothes? If not, when and why did you change your style? Was the change in style connected to something deeper in your spirit, in your soul?

This brings up another interesting question. Women are sometimes accused of being "slaves" to the current fashion, whether it is right for them or not. Has

For a writer, nothing is too small, no detail too ordinary, no sight too grotesque to be discarded. It is all grist for the mill, food for thought. The clothes you wore, the food you ate, the road you traveled—all of it, every bit, will come in handy some day, when you're at a loss for words. Write it down so that you don't forget.—Susan Albert

Often I am asked, who taught me to write? Everything, I want to say. Everything taught me, everything became my teacher....the blank times, the daydreaming, the boredom, the American legacy of loneliness and alienation, my Jewish background, the sky, the desk, a pen, the pavement, small towns I've driven through. The list could go on and on until I named every moment I was alive. All of it in mysterious and ordinary ways fed me. Writing became the tool I used to digest my life and to understand, finally, the grace, the gratitude I could feel, not because everything was hunky-dory, but because we can use everything we are...And we can't avoid an inch of our own experience; if we do, it causes a blur, a bleep, a puffy unreality. Our job is to wake up to everything, because if we slow down enough, we see we are everything.—Natalie Goldberg

You are what you wear. Clothing is a paradox: it both covers and reveals a lot about us. It is a presentation that is meant to offset parts of our personalities. When you go to an important meeting you dress to look formidable, to make you feel solid when you speak.—Bonni Goldberg

Who are we? It is not so much the clothes we wear but the way we carry, think of, and see ourselves. We need a look that celebrates Women's New Middle Age. Enough of this business of squeezing into the hip huggers and shrunken T-shirts we wore twenty years ago; it says we are afraid of becoming big and beautiful.... We are women of content, and it is our vision of ourselves as more exciting and appealing as we age that makes it so.—Nancy Friday



there been a time in your life when this was true for you? What particular fashions have attracted you? Why? Did your interest in certain “looks” have to do with something in yourself, or in the fashion world itself? If your interests have changed, why?

On the surface, these questions may seem easy, but they're not. Clothing is not just a protective covering for the body, but a powerful personal and cultural symbol. The housedress and apron, the power suit, the miniskirt, the Wonderbra, designer jeans, Birkenstocks, chi pants—each reveals something different about us, and symbolizes a different aspect of our relationship to the society in which we live. The clothes you have worn throughout your life testify to your changing self—and it's all a part of your wonderful, amazing true life story. Tell it!



Workshop/Book Signing Schedule

In the next few months, Susan Albert will be appearing at the following locations, to discuss *Writing From Life* and/or her two mystery series. Phone the contact number for details about the event.

- May 28**, Austin TX, Dollmaker's Fiesta, "Tales of Our Lives." For info write 2900 W. Anderson Ln #20-244 Austin TX 78757.
- June 26**, Full Circle Books, Oklahoma City OK, 405-842-2900
- June 27-28**, Center for Poets and Writers, Rogers University, Tulsa OK. Writing From Life Workshop. 918-594-8215
- July 10**, Kate's Mystery Books, Cambridge MA 617-491-2660
- July 13**, Barnes & Noble, Framingham MA
- July 14**, Haven't Got a Clue Mystery Bookstore, Albany NY 800-694-2583
- July 15**, Rosemary House, Mechanicsburg PA 717-79507471
- July 16**, Mystery Lovers Bookshop, Oakmont PA 412-828-4877
- July 17**, Foul Play Mystery Bookstore, Columbus OH 614-818-2583
- July 18**, Joseph-Beth Booksellers, Cincinnati OH
- July 19**, Holly-Cooke Books, Louisville KY, 502-895-6789
- July 20**, Barnes & Noble, Memphis
- August 20**, Fun Ed, Dallas TX, Writing From Life workshop, 800-343-2666

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.

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!

Backporch Wardrobe

Yesterday's spring rains...
 mud-slogged barnboots lie
 waiting on faded red plywood decking
 for that next trip...
 to grain the ewes
 haul water,
 empty pails under leaks,
 check for signs of lambing...
 and lie there...still...
 mud-wet, waiting,
 while springs of yesterday
 rain inside.

Donna Nagy
 Moscow ID

Looking into the Mirror

The agonies of choice,
 lingering, irresolute, between
 the June Allyson twinset with pearls
 and the sweetly-collared white blouse
 that I hope makes me look
 like Debbie Reynolds.

Who was I dressing for, and why?
 I can't remember.
 All I remember is
 oh dear God, how it *mattered*.

Paula Cooke
 Chicago IL

San Francisco, Santa Cruz, Half Moon Bay...if you had been my mother's daughter, even the *sound* of those places would delight you, hearing the lilt in her voice when she spoke them. A magic-starved, Connecticut housing project kid, I never questioned how a foggy, drizzly, gray day could inspire my mom to break from her housewife routine, and, with abandon, in determined steps, answer her spirit's need of a long, brisk walk in what most regard as depressing weather. I'd run alongside her, like a filly trying to nurse from a trotting mare. Perhaps her pace was a deliberate means of discouraging me; perhaps she was unaware of my presence. But her expressed joy was so rare during my childhood that I had to at least try to be in her company... *My childhood* is asterisked by *her* Californian remembrance.

M. Wright
 Collinsville CT

There was once a time when the skies were blue and the air was sweet and clean. In the front pasture were white oak trees draped with Spanish moss and for as long as I can remember two crepe myrtles stood on either side of the front gate. Out by the road that led up to the old white house was a pine tree so big that three grown men could not reach around it, even if they joined hands. Under this giant pine a little girl would sit among the tiny white violets and dream of a handsome knight who would come and carry her away. Maybe one who looked like Daddy.

The giant pine tree is gone, and the old white house, but the little girl lives, older and wiser, still waiting for her knight.

Bobbie Mahoney
 Tustin CA

More True Words . . .

A Letter to Grandma

When you moved too slow I became impatient because youth is always in a hurry.
 When you told the same old stories I become bored and couldn't fathom why....
 You could remember what happened fifty years ago but not what you had for breakfast.
 Your eyes became dim and I was upset when you tipped over chairs and tables.

But now I realize too late
 that your feet were swifter than mine.
 Your stories were better than mine.
 Your eyes, even though dim,
 were able to see so much more than mine.

Nellie Hufford Ruby
 Whipple OH



The pieces by Carol Waid and Virginia Geck were written in a Story Circle, in response to the suggestion at the bottom of p. 34, in Writing From Life.

The message of this birth for me is:

That I have a face that doesn't have to be peeled. I don't need to bury it to find it again, an archeological discovery, rusted and muddied and dirty.

My journaling was born in 1991. Arnold's face was embedded in it, like a branding iron on a cow's hide. His face was the Carol who lived only with a machine, like a machine that keeps people alive against their will.

In 1997, it is Carol's face. It is her voice, *my* voice that hits the page. My voice is spreading like Velveeta cheese. Arnold now sits in a back pack, scratching to get out. I keep him safely tucked in a zip lock bag. The bag springs a leak every now and then, but I am handy with super glue. His voice tries to overpower me, and at times the back pack feels like a wooden cross, but I drag and drag until it feels lighter.

Today the bag feels cotton-candy light. It's a helium balloon I will let go. It is a spirit, not a nightmare, not chains and locks on me, the living. I'll let it fly free.

Carol Waid
 Georgetown TX

Weeping in the Womb, or Born into Adoption

It's supposed to be quiet in there, or that's how we imagine it. But it's not. It's a constant swishing, churning, growling, and gurgling in sensusound...over you and in you...you pulse when it pulses. It's being swept and leaned here and there, and finally, when two or three months have passed and the truth emerges, it's full of weeping. Tears bubbling up, spilling out, cascading over, drowning everything in the close vicinity—and believe me, I was close. I wonder if my courage was born then, springing from tears. Someone else was doing all my crying for me after all, paving my way with tears. When her water broke, more tears spilled out, and after, when the thing was done and I was me and she was alone, tears were all she had left. I slid on tears into life, quite comfortably. They washed me into the world. My own tears later would gather in a reservoir that fed me strength, gave me inspiration, urged me on to further growth. But she would be swept down a river of tears through life, never finding what she longed for. It was gone, and grown, and glad.

Virginia Geck
 Austin TX



A Scrapbook in the Heart

Out of sorrow comes new beginnings. When my 21-year-old son Paul died in 1988, it felt as though I had died as well.

Yet slowly and gradually time has replaced the grief and unspeakable pain with a new appreciation of life and love.

Life is renewed in each new grandchild, and in the spring when daffodils dance in our front yard.

Life will never be the same without my son, yet I know I will survive the greatest loss a mother can endure.

Author Melody Beattie says we should "honor the journey your soul mapped out for you...make a scrapbook in your heart to help you remember."

In remembering, once again I am learning joy.

Sandra VanOrman
 Spanaway WA

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

The Enchanted Self: A Positive Therapy (Harwood Academic Publishers, ISBN 90-5702-503-5) is a book I couldn't resist. It was written by Dr. Barbara Becker Holstein, a therapist in Ocean, New Jersey, who believes that many people are unhappy not just because of past hurts and present disappointments, but because they simply cannot remember being happy. While ***The Enchanted Self*** is primarily for mental health professionals, it is written in an easy, graceful style that makes it easily accessible, as Holstein shares her own story and clients' stories, and uses them to illustrate her theory of the enchanted self.

What is "the enchanted self"? According to Holstein, it is the "capacity to reclaim, reintegrate, or adapt positive states of being from previous times in our lives into present-day workable, pleasurable, growth-promoting, joyful states of being." It involves experiencing "enchanted moments"—a uniquely joyful feeling that combines older happy memories with present experience in a positive and meaningful way. Holstein explains: "Enchanted memories are different from everyday memories because they have a rich layered quality, derived from a variety of positive memories, sensory images, and present-day attitudes about the experiences themselves." In other words, enchanted moments are those times when we are in touch with a self that is whole, happy, and creative—the enchanted self.

But reclaiming the enchanted self is not an easy, and certainly not a painless, task. Holstein's enchanted self emerged through a long therapeutic process, "unpeeling as an onion is unpeeled," she says, "layer by layer," as she began to discover more and more of her own past and present happiness, buried beneath past hurts and feelings of violation. Having learned for herself some ways to get in touch with that core of happy contentment, she began sharing her insights with clients, asking them to tell her about the times when they had felt most whole, centered, balanced, joyful—to tell her their happiest stories, in other words. Retrieving those moments, reliving them, she says, is a first step toward reclaiming wholeness and balance in the present life.

As I read Holstein's book, I thought about how her ideas are related to our need to tell our stories, and especially our stories of joyful discovery, self-realization, achievement and fulfillment—our gifts, graces, and glories. Recalling past positive moments and putting them into writing (or translating them into your favorite medium—painting, textiles, dance, song, etc.) can be a way of accessing more present joy. This doesn't mean that we bury or deny our past hurts; but it does suggest that it is helpful to *reframe* them (to use Holstein's term) by seeing our traumas in the light of our strengths. I am reminded of a friend's long, sad story about her husband's death from cancer, which she summarized in one glorious sentence: "It was a terrible time—but oh, how much I grew from it! I thought I was too weak to live without him. Now I know



*Each of us is unique and profoundly beautiful. A Jewish silent prayer is written: "Thank you, God, for letting me be born with my uniqueness and special gifts, because if there had already been someone like me, I would not need to have been born."—Barbara Becker Holstein, *The Enchanted Self**

When Edith talked about her childhood, she at first remembered only its dysfunctional aspects: the fighting between her parents and their constant criticality. I suggested that we go back and look again at her childhood to identify times when in spite of the pain of family life, she felt excited about her own life and about herself. With that encouragement she could separate out positive memories of herself from dysfunctional family experiences and she remembered some wonderful times: delightful family picnics, fishing with her grandfather and shelling peas with her grandmother on the porch.—BBH

I remember sitting in the back yard on the swing when I was eight, moving very slowly and comfortably as the sun beat down. I felt content. I remembered the scent of my skin after playing outside for hours and how much I enjoyed putting my hands and arms against my nose so I could smell the sweat. How I loved that mild, earthy aroma! I remember how good I felt sitting up in bed after a good sleep, with nowhere to go in the morning....—BBH

Books for the Journey—from page 13

One's past is a mix of negative and positive experiences. Often we remember painful situations too vividly and are unable by ourselves to recognize or acknowledge our own successes. We see ourselves through a mirror darkly, unable to recognize our own special qualities and their potential for reinventing ourselves more positively.—BBH

Good feelings can be profound ones: a sense of wholeness, euphoria, a spiritual connection with God. Good feelings can also occupy a small moment of sweetness, such as enjoying a particular aroma.—BBH

I wish you a joyful journey. I hope that your life feels whole and that you find in your past, whether beautiful or painful, a repertoire of talents and capacities that are uniquely yours. I hope that your talents, capacities, and potential will give you a sense of well-being as they thrust you into the world in meaningful ways.—BBH

*Devalued when born
Fed but not nourished
Asleep but not dead
Sleeping beauty—awakened!
Beautiful woman
Beautiful soul—
Beautiful person.*

BBH

just how strong I am!”

I also thought of some of my favorite women's memoirs, most of which involve the pain of disappointment and the anguish of loss—translated into the compelling joy of self-discovery. I thought of Mary Karr's *Liar's Club*, for instance. Karr's is a wild story of violence, alcoholism, and childhood rape, but in all the craziness she finds an unsentimental joy, and emerges whole (but not unscathed) from her turbulent past. In the end, her demons are (mostly) exorcised by her telling, and she has created some enchanted moments. I thought of Lucy Grealey's *Autobiography of a Face*, which tells the story of her childhood disfigurement by cancer, and the self-understanding she ultimately achieves. I thought of Gretel Erlich's chronicle, *A Match to the Heart*, of a woman struck by lightning. Enchanted selves, discovered in a dark mirror? Yes, yes.

In her newsletter, *The Enchanted Self*, Holstein offers two exercises that are also story-telling exercises (reprinted with her permission). Try them, and see if they help you come closer to that part of you that is your enchanted self.

Exercise 1. This exercise involves making positive deposits into your memory bank. Over the next few days, stay alert to when you are in a good mood. Try to use all of your senses to experience the present more fully, especially when you become aware of a “potential deposit.” When the moment is right, ask yourself the following questions. What is going on? Does it remind you of other good times in your life? Can you list several of these earlier events? What were the best parts of these earlier experiences? Take the time to describe them, perhaps writing them down or dictating them into a tape recorder. Now gradually refocus your mind on the present. What are you seeing? What are the smells? What are the sounds? How do these sensations make you feel? Try to be aware of the details, taking the time to savor them as you deposit them into your memory bank. If writing or dictating a narrative does not come easily to you, try drawing a picture, writing a poem, or composing a tune. Just do something to capture the moment in a way that is most meaningful to you. Your abilities as an artist, writer, or composer are less important than your desire to relish life.

Exercise 2. This exercise is about withdrawing positive memories from your memory bank. No matter how dysfunctional one's life is, each of us has experienced moments that were good and possibly inspirational. To fully appreciate these memories, we sometimes need the courage to let go of their dysfunctional aspects, revising them to emphasize positive elements. Scan your memory bank for a memory. Let go of any negative feelings around it, focusing on its inherent beauty and the good things that may have come about afterwards. Relish the part of the memory that has some enchantment. Use your senses. How did your body feel? What were the sounds and smells? What did you see? Remember that the pain is a part of the distant past. Enjoy what is best about this memory before you let it go.

The Enchanted Self: A Positive Therapy, by Barbara Becker Holstein, is available in softcover for \$18 from 1-800-565-9523. You may obtain a year's subscription to the quarterly newsletter she co-edits with Doreen Laperdon-Addison by sending \$10 to *The Enchanted Self*, P.O. Box 2112, Ocean, New Jersey 07712. Audio tapes of her book are also available from that address.

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.

From East Texas comes news of a small, portable Story Circle that moves from city to city:

"We had our first Story Circle Sunday before last at Laurel's house in Houston. The topic was "Beginnings" and Laurel read what she had written at Susan's workshop and Vaughn and I read about our births. We plan to meet every second Sunday each month. The next meeting will be at my home in Port Arthur and the topic will be "Journeys." Appropriate, I think, because Laurel will just have returned by then from a trip to Rome and the Vatican (lucky her!) and, after all, it is the season for spring bird migration...."

Leila Jordan
Port Arthur TX

The following announcement of a Story Circle appeared in the Mystery Lovers Bookshop News. The group, led by mother-daughter duo Mary Alice Gorman and Alison Babusci, met at the Bookshop, 514 Allegheny River Blvd., Oakmont PA. They worked with both oral and written storytelling. If you're interested, check with Mary Alice at 412-828-4877 about the current status of the group. She says they had a number of successful meetings, and are exploring other possible formats.

"Experienced writers, post card writers, new grandmothers, mothers and daughters, artists and teachers are welcome... As the storytellers of every generation, women have shared an oral and written tradition in the creation of our culture. In song, needlework, diaries, letters, painting and poetry, women tell of life, love, joy and pain. Now you can explore this unique historical role and prepare your own story in the supportive atmosphere of a Story Circle...."

We were so happy to hear from Gail Godio, of Sandisfield, MA, who wrote:

"I must tell you that my participation in a Story Circle has changed my life for the better. Writing in story has opened my mind and soul. I am disabled, and need this outlet in my life. I've always enjoyed writing down my feelings and thoughts through letters to friends, a journal or two, but writing "in story" and sharing with other women is wonderful for me in many ways. Thank you for inspiring me...."

Thank you, Gail—and keep writing!

Grace Butland facilitated a 10-member group that met for eight weeks at a community arts center in Torrington CT. The group was diverse, but they had a great deal in common:

"When we read our stories, we see that we are all the same. We laugh and cry together. We learn from each other....And we all agree that we've learned so much about ourselves and our relationships, and found meaning in our experiences, through our writing...."

Grace may repeat the group in the fall. If you're interested, write to her at P.O. Box 246, Riverton CT 06065.

Judy Alter used Susan's book, Writing From Life, to lead a noncredit class at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, TX. Judy reports that the class was "a great success...fun and surprising," and that the members of the group quickly became friends. The course will be repeated on alternate Monday evenings, beginning in mid- to late-September. For enrollment information, call TCU's Office of Extended Education, 817-921-7132.

Jennifer Howdyshell leads a Journalkeeper's Group and publishes a monthly newsletter called "Journalkeeper's News." Subscriptions are \$15/yr from Jennifer Howdyshell, 801 Catherine St. Pekin IL 61554. About her Journalkeeper's Group, she writes:

"I found a convenient place to meet—at a local bank conference room—scheduled a time, and it has been a hit ever since. The group has 12 members, all female. We range in age from early 20's to late 60's. We meet once a month for 2 or 3 hours. There is no cost. For me, the group is a circle of support, a network of women who help to keep my enthusiasm high. They look to me to lead them, but once we get started, we all work together. We talk, share stories, discuss writing, complain, write, and otherwise have a wonderful time."

"We have formed a Story Circle in Georgetown TX," writes Jodie Steger. "We started in March and meet every other week for about two hours. We begin with a short meditation, then use the chapters of *Writing From Life* for direction and ideas. We are still working out our format, and have not closed our membership. If anyone wants information about our group, they can contact Linda Watkins at 512-931-0948 or e-mail: l Watkins@texas.net."

Our Readers Share Their Stories....



Barbara Holman, Spring TX

Have you read Sarah Ban Breathnach's *Simple Abundance*? It, too, is from one woman to another woman and includes exercises for getting in touch with one's authentic self or soul through daily texts. I'm at the mid-century point in my life with an empty nest and no spouse. I'm looking for ways to live the second half of my life more fully, truer to me, and to capture those dreams set aside or never really expressed heretofore.

Diane Kimball, Plymouth MI

Your *Story Circle Journal* arrived, and I immediately read it cover to cover. This is just the kind of thing I have desired to do—write the “myth” that has been unfolding as my life...so it is time for me to connect with your network and become part of a community of women who wish to share their “myths” that form the human psyche. I am using the idea of a “mythic” life from the book by Jean Houston, *A Mythic Life*, which I find an exciting read. I would also recommend *Women Who Run With the Wolves* by Clarissa Pinkola Estes. An exquisite book!

Dr. Marilyn Gilbert, Flint, MI

I am currently involved in a gentle, gradual transition from a twenty-year practice as a psychologist (specializing

in major loss, dying, death, transition) to a hopeful career as a writer and seminar presenter. I am hungry for a forum in which to exchange ideas and make connection with others in that wide circle “out there.”

Evelyn Cook, The Woodlands TX

I will be retiring in June after many years of teaching middle school students. During the past 20 years I have been a facilitator and participant in a number of Scripture Study groups. It became apparent to me that the people attending these sessions were really interested in doing inner work as they applied scripture events to their life stories. That began my long investigation into spiritual and psychological growth. I attended workshops and investigated ideas through reading....I have decided I would like to be part of a Story Circle either as a facilitator or as a participant. Will you send me information about attending or starting a group in the area of The Woodlands?

Emily Ilg, Appleton, WI

Ever since I read Carolyn Heilbrun's book *Writing A Woman's Life*—which I found by happenstance in a little library when I was working in Westfield MA a few years ago—the necessity of creating our own stories and sharing them with

others has become very important to me....I've even designed and produced sweatshirts that encourage sharing “herstory.”

Shirley Norton, Pennington, NJ

I have been leading workshops in Life Story writing for the past five years and am most enthusiastic about networking.

Sandra VanOrman, Spanaway, WA

I find if I write about only one incident or aspect of my life instead of trying to cover everything from the time I was born, it is easier. Writing my stories has given me the self confidence to branch out in my free lance writing, and I received word that an essay I wrote called “Autumn's Song” has been accepted by Beishel Books to be included in their anthology, “From Eulogy to Joy.” So I am thrilled about that!

Sandra is coordinating our first “Stories in the Round,” a round-robin storytelling group that shares stories by mail. (For details, see the box on page 10.) Thanks, Sandra, for volunteering. Is there anybody else out there who would be willing to coordinate “Stories in the Round”?

This membership is a gift.
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